

February 17, 2019 *“Faith the Size of a Mustard Seed”*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Mark 9:14-29; Matthew 17:14-20

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The two Scripture readings today, one from St. Mark and the other from St. Matthew, tell the exact same story. So obviously, both disciples must have thought the point of the story is important. So let's review. A man has a son who is ill – back then they thought he was possessed by a demon – and the man asks Jesus to cast the demon out of his son because the disciples weren't able to do it. So Jesus does what the man asked! When the disciples pressed Jesus as to why they couldn't do it, but he could, Jesus tells them it's all about prayer, and it's all about faith. Prayer and faith.

In actuality, these two concepts are really dependent on each other. Because it does no good to pray, if you don't have the faith that God will answer those prayers. And if you don't have faith, your prayers will be powerless – more like wishful thinking. So let's look further at why having faith is so important. The Bible tells us that “Without faith it is impossible to please God. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him.” And so often we hear Jesus say to someone who asks for healing, “Let it be done according to your faith.” Now this may make us a little uncomfortable. You may be asking yourself, “How much faith do I have? Do I have enough?” Well, if so, then today's scripture is just for you. Because we heard Jesus assure us, "Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as the size of a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, move from here to there, and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

Now let's look at the story more closely. This man comes to Jesus in distress, desperate because his child is suffering with seizures and convulsions. We can identify with this man, can't we? No one wants to see their child in pain. Each and every one of us would gladly take upon ourselves our children's or grandchildren's afflictions, even doubling it, if it would only relieve the pain or suffering they might be going through. I know this to be true because I've seen it firsthand, right here, within this congregation and within my own family. So out of desperation this man finally comes to Jesus. That's not unlike us either. When things are good, when there are no issues in our lives, when our hearts are gladdened with wine, so to speak, we have a tendency to become lax, complacent in our faith. But when things go wrong, suddenly our faith matters. And, our faith better deliver.

But here's an interesting point. Even though this man is desperate for a cure for his son, he still has doubt. He even phrases his question to Jesus with a condition. "If" you can do anything Jesus, have

mercy on us, and help us. Only, "if" you can... Jesus. I can just imagine Jesus sadly shaking his head and responding exactly as he did. "If I can? Anything is possible if a person believes." Now what Jesus is doing here is effectively asking the man the million dollar question, "do you believe?" Do you have faith? And in all honesty, what is this parent or any parent going to say in a situation like that? "No, Jesus, I struggle with lots of things about my faith. Your virgin birth concerns me. I'm unconvinced that you walked on water. And, I'm not sure you're really the Son of God." No, I don't think this father would say any of those things. Nor would any of us. Because, what if we really did admit that to Jesus. I mean, would he say... "Well then, your son can just go on suffering." No, we can be absolutely certain our Lord would not say that. But my guess is that none of us would want to take that chance.

And so the father responds at that moment the way any parent would, "Yes, I do believe." Just cure my baby. Take away his pain and suffering. Make him well, Jesus. But then... this father goes a step further and expresses out loud what many of us think inside. In his anguish, in his uncertainty, in his doubt, in his humility, he bares his soul, and ours, before God. And he asks Jesus, "but help me overcome my unbelief." Help me with my lack of faith. You see, even two thousand years ago, with Jesus right there, people struggled with questions about faith. And you know what – Jesus was okay with that. He doesn't rebuke the man or question his theology. He accepts the man's faith, which was only the size of a mustard seed, and he cures the boy. God does the impossible for this man.

Now I think we need to take away two important lessons from this story. The first is easy. Growth! That is, we all need to aspire to grow in our faith, despite our doubts. Because complacency is the deadly foe of all spiritual growth. As playwright Norman Wilde once said, "Lord, I don't pray for enough faith to move a mountain. I can take dynamite and move that mountain if I need to. I pray, Lord, for enough faith to move me." Yes, we must nurture that seed of faith within us so that we can meet head-on, with confidence, a God that confounds our capacity to understand him, but a God who we so desperately need. You see, that's the wonderful thing about a seed. It's all about its potential. Just hold an acorn in your hand while standing next to a great oak tree, and you'll understand what I mean.

The second point to take away from today's lesson is, of course, how faith and trust in our awesome God can help us get through this life. Even in those times when we can't see or understand. Even when it's shrouded in mystery. You know we often talk about the 'mystery of our faith.' Why? Because mystery

might best be described as one of those thin places where we humans and the divine encounter one another. Now, to some, mystery may be unwanted because it confirms that there is a limit to our capacity to know and to understand, and therefore, to control. Especially in an age where we have so much power and information and control at our fingertips. It's hard for us to let go and let God be in charge of our lives. And so, in order to have faith, we need to ask ourselves – in what kind of God am I putting my faith?

I can tell you that for me, I trust in a God who is much bigger, much greater, than I can understand. A God who is all knowing, all seeing, all powerful. When I am in need or in trouble, I have to have faith in a God I can stand in “awe” of. Think of a time when you encountered the divine, and were in awe. Perhaps walking along the ocean, or looking out over a mountaintop, or holding a newborn baby in your arms. And at that moment, you knew, without a shadow of doubt, that you were in the presence of a being so much greater than yourself. Well that's the God I put my faith in. A God who puts the planets into orbit and fixes the stars in the sky, and makes the blood run through my veins. A God who knows more about me than I do, and is more powerful than I am. Because when I'm going through the storms and trials of my life, I know that I will falter and fail if I don't have faith in that God. For who else can we have faith in? Our politicians who day after day consistently fail us? Other people who can hurt and disappoint us? Money, stocks and savings, that can vanish when the economy falters? Our own imperfect selves? No! But when we put our faith in that awesome God – even a little faith, even a wavering faith, God can do the impossible in our lives. When it seems like every door is closed to you, he will open a new path. When it seems like the darkness is about to encompass you, he will shine a light to give you hope. When you feel like you're at the end of your rope and can't go on, he will give you strength to take one more step. When you feel afraid, or hurt or confused, he will speak to your heart when you least expect it and give you the assurance and guidance you need. And when you are facing death's door, he will be there to defeat even death and bring you new life, eternal life. God can and will do the impossible.

In closing, as I've told you before, Jesus doesn't call us to walk on water. He did that. He doesn't call us to change water into wine. He did that. Jesus doesn't call us to multiply fishes and loaves, he did that. Jesus doesn't call us to die on a cross. He did that. Jesus calls us to have but one thing... have faith in God.¹ Even faith the size of a mustard seed. Amen.

¹ Words of Fire, Grace Imathiu