

“Faith That Moves Mountains”

Matthew 17:14-23

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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I think it's safe to say that most people are not crazy about Mondays. We all like the weekends. Weekends mean rest and relaxation – maybe. Weekends were actually invented by God himself. In the account of creation in Genesis we're told that on the seventh day God rested and that he set aside that day as the Sabbath to be kept holy forever. So more than anything else, weekends mean worship! But no matter what your weekend holds it's always followed by Monday. And nobody likes Mondays.

Last week we looked at the mountaintop experience of Jesus' transfiguration where his real self was briefly revealed to Peter, James and John. It was an experience that those disciples never forgot and years ago they even wrote about it in their epistles. But as we saw last week they couldn't stay on the mountain. Peter had offered to build tents for Jesus, Moses and Elijah so they could stay there. Instead they had to come down to reality. They had to come down to Monday. Mountaintop experiences are followed by a return to the mundane, or even to disappointment.

The last painting that the great Italian Renaissance artist Raphael painted is called *The Transfiguration*, and it captures this entire story beautifully. At the top of the painting we see the transfigured Jesus floating above the earth to represent his glory, his heavenly appearance. On either side, a little lower, are Moses and Elijah. On the ground beneath them in awe are Peter, James and John. But while this is going on the lower half of the painting tells a different story. There we see the other disciples surrounded by a crowd. The father has brought his demon-possessed son to be healed but the disciples have failed. What we see is a lot of frustration and finger pointing.

Matthew tells us that when Jesus and the three get to the bottom of the mountain they find a crowd gathered. As they approach a man

comes up to Jesus and kneels down before him. The man is desperate. He's heard about Jesus and has come to beg him to heal his son but Jesus is out of town. He's on the mountain. So the man asks Jesus' disciples to heal his son. They try and try and nothing happens, which is surprising since Jesus had previously given them that power. Matthew 10:1 says Jesus “called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction.” But for some reason this time they were unable.

The account of this event also appears in both Mark and Luke and both of them tell us that when Jesus approached the boy the demon sent the boy into convulsions, which is why our English translations say he was epileptic. But when Jesus speaks the boy is healed immediately. Jesus' healing word is always effective. But the healing is not really what this story is all about. Matthew includes this to teach us about faith and discipleship and more specifically the failure that awaits us when faith and discipleship are lacking. We see that because immediately the disciples ask why they could not heal the boy, even though they had done similar things before.

Jesus' response is startling. He says, “Because of your lack of faith.” Really? Well how much faith did they need? Jesus says that if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.” At this point his disciples must feel like *they're* the size of a mustard seed.

The saying that “faith can move mountains” isn't about real, geological mountains. In the Bible, just like today, it was a way of describing something that was impossible. Jesus is saying that with only a tiny bit of imperfect faith we can accomplish the impossible for him. Surely his disciples had at least *that* much faith. It

hadn't been that long since Peter, speaking for the whole group, had confessed Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. But Jesus says they failed because they didn't have enough faith.

At this point I think we have to stop and ask, "What do we mean by faith?" I've talked about this before but it's worth repeating. Faith consists of three parts. The first part is *knowledge*. This part is self-explanatory. We can't believe what we don't know. That's why regular, ongoing Bible study is so important for each one of us. The second component of real faith is *assent* or *agreement*. This is where belief comes in. We can know things that we don't agree with or don't believe. So to have faith we must accept that the knowledge is true. The third part of faith is the hardest, *trust* or *commitment*. We must know that Jesus is truly the Son of God and that he died and rose again for our salvation. But we must then commit our lives to him.

The disciples had knowledge. They even believed it. But they failed to trust. When the man asked them to heal his son they did the same things they had done before and they said the same things they had said before. This time it didn't work. In Mark's gospel (and even in some of the manuscripts of Matthew) Jesus tells them that "this kind only comes out with prayer and fasting." The problem was that the disciples were relying on their own power, their own abilities to heal the boy instead of trusting the power of Christ through the Holy Spirit. They really had no faith. The work of Christ only happens by serious prayer and dependence on him.

How often do you and I do the same thing? Anyone have any mountains in their life that you would like moved? Perhaps an illness or financial problems or difficulties in our relationships. When faced with a challenge, too often we try to overcome it on our own. Only when things still don't work out do we turn to God for help. Or maybe when an opportunity comes along you weigh all the options and try

to make a decision based on the information you have. Then, after you've made your decision, you ask God to bless *your* plans.

In response Jesus says to each of us, "O faithless and twisted generation, how long do I have to put up with you?" You and I too often become twisted by getting our priorities out of order. We put seeking and serving God at the bottom of the list, something we do if we have time. I'm just as guilty as the next guy here and this is my full time job.

In addition to knowing and believing the Bible, we each need a faith that trusts Christ fully. We need to trust his love for us and we need to trust his plans for us. In Jeremiah 29:11 God says, "I know the plans I have for you. I plan to give you a future and a hope." Our job is to trust him.

So how much faith do we need? The size of a mustard seed. That's not much. But that faith must be genuine in order to move mountains. The other gospels tell us that when Jesus told the father that he must believe the man responded, "I believe. Help my unbelief." He had faith the size of a mustard seed and his son was healed. How do we know if our faith is genuine? We can't keep it inside. Genuine faith is visible. It results in worship and prayer and service. Not out of ritual or habit. Ritual doesn't move mountains, genuine faith does—even a little bit of faith. Faith can move a mountain, not because of the strength of our faith but because of the strength of our Lord.

Effective faith, then, is a relationship in which we actually depend upon God. Faith that moves mountains in our lives is a faith where we are beyond our own abilities and are truly trusting God to meet our needs, especially in the areas of our time and money. Not a blind faith but an informed, believing, trusting faith that comes from a personal relationship with the God of the universe, Jesus. And with that kind of faith, nothing is impossible.

Amen