

Series: The Good News as Reported by Matthew  
 Sermon: The Faces of Faith  
 Scripture: Matthew 17:14-20  
 Speaker: Pastor Phil Thengvall  
 Date: March 30, 2008.

“Got any rivers you think are uncrossable?  
 Got any mountains you can’t tunnel through?  
 God specializes in things tho’t impossible  
 He does the things others cannot do.”

If Christ were to show up without warning tomorrow at your work place, or your home, or your school what would he see? Would he see you fulfilling your purpose as his follower, being fruitful in your area of ministry? Or would he see you as he saw nine of his disciples, forgetful of your task, and ineffective in ministry because of a crisis of faith?

To have an accurate understanding of this event in the life of Christ and his disciples we cannot disconnect it from that which precedes it, the Transfiguration, which Pastor Mike took us through last Sunday. The disciples had a monumental “mountain top” experience. What comes to your mind when you think of a “mountain top” experience? The following examples come to my mind:

\*Attending my first Billy Graham Crusade in the Cow Palace in San Francisco, a crusade that lasted for two months with a total attendance of 696,000. I sang in the youth choir under the direction of Cliff Barrows. (I was only three years old.)

\*Attending an Urbana Missions Conference where I sensed God’s call into the ministry of the local church.

\*The years I spent at seminary under the influence of godly professors and fellow students.

\*Being prayed over by 50,000 laymen at a Promise Keepers Conference in Boulder, CO, in 1994, 60 of which were men from First Free.

\*Praising God with 40,000 pastors in the Georgia Dome in Atlanta.

\*Time alone with God on numerous visits to the Glen, the Navigator’s Conference Center in Colorado Springs.

\*A week-long spiritual retreat with my wife in Wisconsin.

What these “mountain top” experiences have in common is an unusual awareness of God’s presence that mark the event and make it one that you wish you could package up and take home to open and enjoy it again and again. I know we cannot remain on the mountain forever, and must eventually return to the plain, or valley, or sometimes to the depression of our everyday existence.

What has it been like for you when you leave the mountain? What was it like for Jesus and his friends? For Jesus, Peter, James, and John it was a let down in more than one way. Jesus had led them up a high mountain, and Luke records that “the next day, when

they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met (them). Please follow along as I read our text from Matthew 17:14-20.

When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. “Lord have mercy on my son,” he said. “He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him.” “O unbelieving and perverse generation,” Jesus replied, “How long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me.” Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed from that moment. Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?” He replied, “Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”

As we look at this incident I want us to focus on three faces or aspects of faith: when faith is absent; when faith is inadequate; and, when faith is effective, or what Jesus calls faith like a “mustard seed”. It is not difficult to understand which face Jesus and his three companions met as they returned from their “mountain top” experience. They witnessed the effects of absent faith, of unbelief.

The nine disciples who did not get invited to the overnight retreat had to stay and manage the demands of ministry. And, wouldn’t you know it; among the sick and demon possessed people who came to them there was an unusually difficult case. Matthew, Mark, and Luke record this incident, and Mark gives the most detail. From him we learn that the father believed his son was possessed by a demon, and as a result he could not hear or speak; his seizures included foaming at the mouth, gnashing of teeth, and rigidity, and that he had had this condition since childhood.

Jesus’ followers had failed in their attempt to exorcise the demon, and it did not take him long to uncover the reason.

He accused them all, everyone within the sound of his voice, including the disciples, of being “unbelieving and perverse”. Unbelief is an absence of faith, a lack of trust in God. Perverse speaks of being twisted or crooked, and these folks certainly had a twisted, distorted view of God and his will. What happens when faith is absent?

When faith is missing it is first of all a source of discouragement, both for the participants and for the observers. The boy’s father must have been discouraged by the fact that the disciples were unable to heal his son. I assume other means of help had been exhausted, and this may have been a last resort effort on the father’s part.

It goes without saying that the disciples were discouraged and maybe embarrassed as well, having their failure exposed in front of their master. I imagine they had been having some victory, doing some healings, maybe even successfully exorcising some lesser demons. Otherwise there would have been more than one person complaining about their lack of achievement in ministry.

Someone else was also discouraged by the absence of faith; Jesus was discouraged. His outcry, his complaint is evidence of a deep disappointment, a great frustration with these people. To find his personal followers, men in whom he had invested months of training, beaten, helpless, and ineffective must have daunted even the Savior. His task must have looked almost hopeless. Would it ever be possible to turn these men of the world into men of God?

“How long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?”

Having just tasted of the glory of heaven which he left and would soon enjoy again, life on earth among these spiritual pygmies was becoming very burdensome.

Unbelief was also a detriment to ministry, a hindrance to accomplishing the mission on which Jesus had sent his followers. Early in their time with Jesus he had commissioned them “and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness” (Matthew 10:1). As they went out believing, they experienced great success. Probably this was their first failure in ministry.

Such general unbelief had also been a detriment to the ministry Jesus wanted to have in Nazareth as recorded in Matthew 13:53-58. Jesus did not lack the faith, but due to the lack of faith he found there he chose not to do many miracles among them.

Also, when faith is absent and the work of the Redeemer, the Savior of Mankind was hindered, it meant the enemy had success with his agenda of sickness, disease, and domination. The disciple’s failure provided an open door for the enemy. Discouragement, defeat, and dismay were sown by Satan in the hearts of those in the crowd that day. The religious leaders would make the most of this opportunity to destroy Jesus’ reputation among the Jews.

After Jesus identified the problem as being unbelief, he dealt with the immediate crisis, a boy still possessed by a demon. He asked to have the boy brought to him. Turn with me to Mark (9:20-26)

“When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. “You deaf and mute spirit,” he said, “I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.”

The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, “He’s dead.” But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.”

After the crowd dispersed, the bewildered and discouraged disciples pulled Jesus aside privately and asked him, “Why couldn’t we drive him out?” I don’t suppose the disciples saw themselves as “unbelieving and perverse”, thinking that Jesus was speaking of the crowd and not of them. (I deem this is a common malady that we all experience; temporary deafness when confronted with a personal and embarrassing failure. I have experienced this and probably you have too. At the point of exposure, we become so focused on our self that all other voices are drowned out.)

I assume the disciples perceived their failure as being technical in nature, something they failed to do, instead of it being related to faith. They did not have a clue as to why this demon did not respond as previous demons had. How embarrassing this was for them and in front of Jesus too. Now, in the quiet of the moment, they are ready to listen, to get the easy fix, to remedy this problem so it will never occur again. What will he tell them? Why had he been successful where they had failed? Having no answer themselves they anxiously awaited the secret formula for future triumph.

Jesus replied, "Because you have so little faith". Allow me some literary privilege here to speak what I believe the disciples wanted to say but didn't. "No, Master, not that again, not that "little faith" thing! We don't understand what that means. Don't you know that by now? We hate it when you say that." ("cuz? Daddy")

Jesus only used this phrase when speaking to his disciples. How many times had Jesus told the disciples they were lacking adequate faith, that their faith was too little? Matthew tells us of five occasions, and maybe there were more, since we don't have a transcript of every conversation Jesus had with his disciples in the three years they spent together. What does "having too little faith" look like? We can get an idea from reviewing the four occasions Jesus used it with his disciples.

Look first at Matthew 6, which is midway through the Sermon on the Mount. In this segment of the sermon Jesus addresses the problem of worry, the result of not trusting God for the basic needs of life.

After telling them not to worry about what they will eat, drink, or wear, Jesus says in verse 30, "If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?"

We, like the disciples are guilty of having too little faith whenever we are so worried about God's provision of those things he has promised to provide, that we fail to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Our faith is adequate in times of plenty, but if things appear to get scarce so does our faith. How are you dealing with the US economy these days? Does your heart skip a beat when you hear the daily report from Wall Street?

The next time Jesus mentioned their inadequate faith they were crossing the Sea of Galilee and a storm arose and threatened to sink their boat. Jesus was with them, but not helping, because he was asleep in the boat. We pick up the account in Matthew 8:25,

"The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!" He replied, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. The men were amazed and asked, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!"

It is easy to ask, "Why were they afraid when Jesus was right there with them?" But isn't Jesus with us too, though not physically present? In fact He is more present with us,

because he has promised each of us that he will never leave or forsake us. He is with us wherever we are, 24/7. There is no place we can be that he is not there.

Even though we believe that, who of us can honestly say we have not been just as afraid as the disciples must have been at some time in our life? And why? Because we have too little faith. We like the disciples have questioned God's protection.

In Matthew 14 the disciples, and specifically Peter, doubted God's power. In this well-known event the disciples are again in a boat on the lake, but this time without Jesus. In the middle of the night the disciples are terrified as they see a figure walking toward them, ghost-like, on the water. Jesus identifies himself and Peter asks permission to go water walking to meet him. Join me at verse 29.

"Come," he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Peter began well, until he focused on what he was doing and where he was doing it. I think in his mind he said, "Wait just a minute, I can't walk on water!" And then he couldn't. He began in faith, but changed to what he could do by himself, which was not walk on water. How often I do the same thing, trusting God fully to empower me in a new ministry until I get the hang of it. When I feel I can do much of it by myself, I tell Jesus to go help others who are just learning the ropes.

The truth is I will never be successful in any ministry unless my dependency on God is total. Didn't Jesus say in John 15, "I am the vine, you are the branches; apart from me you can do nothing."?

Inadequate faith also makes for fuzzy thinking; it causes us to miss the point. We focus too much on the physical and not enough on the spiritual.

In Matthew 15:15, after Jesus gave a clear teaching about what makes a person clean or unclean, Peter, spoke for the group and said, "Explain the parable to us." Jesus said, "Are you still so dull?" Jesus was weary of their lack of perception, their inability to understand things that should have been obvious to them by this time. These were his apprentices, his trainees. By now he expected more of them. "How long shall I stay with you, how long shall I put up with you?"

Now turn to Matthew 16, where after Jesus has twice fed great multitudes of people leaving basketfuls of leftovers, the disciples join Jesus and are chiding themselves for forgetting to bring bread.. See Verse 6.

"Be careful," Jesus said to them. "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." They discussed this among themselves and said, "It is because we didn't bring any bread." Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked, "You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread? Do you still not understand? Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? How is it you don't understand that I was not talking to you about bread? But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." Then they understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

The disciples were listening with their human, non-spiritual filters in place. When they heard the word yeast, they realized Jesus knew they had forgotten to bring bread, with or without yeast. They misunderstood because they were self absorbed. They failed to look for a deeper meaning, a spiritual implication. This lack of perception came from inadequate faith. This was a common problem for the disciples, but are we more discerning than they were? We should not be so hard on the disciples; they did not have the indwelling Holy Spirit to help them as we do. Yet, how often do we look only at the physical, literal significance of a situation without asking God to give us his perspective?

With this background let's return to this morning's text. We have a better appreciation of what it may have been like for the disciples to hear once more, "you men have too little faith." This is the bad news. The good news is the faith they had, when used correctly, was more than enough faith. Jesus told them,

"I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

In Jesus' teaching he uses two proverbial expressions, "as small as a mustard seed" and "say to this mountain, 'move' and it will move". Understanding these proverbial expressions will give us insight into his instruction.

Mustard is a Middle Eastern shrub that grows to be the size of a small tree, sometimes attaining 10 feet in height. It has yellow flowers that contain very tiny seeds. In scripture it is used either to describe something very tiny, or something that starts tiny but grows to a remarkable size.

Jesus used the mustard seed to show that a very small amount of faith, when placed in God, will grow to accomplish anything.

The second expression is based on a belief that mountains had deep roots under the surface of the earth that anchored them, making them impossible to move. Jesus used this phrase to indicate that even what is considered humanly impossible is possible to the person with faith in God.

I will first clarify what Mustard Seed Faith is not. It is not the ability to perform signs and miracles to impress others or to prove you are a Christian. On several occasions the Scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus to show them a sign, to work a really big miracle, and thus prove he was who he said he was. Each and every time he refused to do so. When the disciples returned from their first ministry trip they were so excited, and said to Jesus, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name!" Jesus answered, "Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." Mustard seed faith is not to be used for doing miracles for miracles sake.

Nor is mustard seed faith an outpouring of extra faith to meet a particularly tough assignment. Some folks believe faith is some kind of outward commodity that God can give in measurable amounts, 10 lbs., or 50 lbs., of faith, whatever you need. If you lack enough faith, then come to him and he pours in more and fills up your reservoir. But it is incorrect to think of faith in a quantitative sense. The faith Jesus is describing is not given in amounts, depending on how big the mountain is. Look with me at Luke 17:3-6, a conversation between Jesus and his disciples.

"So watch yourselves" If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him." The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

The disciples feel the natural impossibility of forgiving like this, and they turn to the Lord out of a great sense of need and say, "Lord, increase our faith!" If we're going to live at this level, then you're going to have to do something to help us. We can't fulfill these demands unless you give us a lot more faith."

I can relate to this, being overwhelmed by a request of Christ that seems beyond the realm of my ability to fulfill. And isn't this request for increased faith one that God would be excited to grant?

"He replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you."

Jesus is not concerned about the volume of their faith, but the presence of faith. God can work wonders with a tiny amount of faith. Mustard seed faith always begins small, and is sufficient for large and small tasks. Faith has only as much power as its object.

Finally, mustard seed faith is never effective unless it is in sync with the will and purpose of God. If God wants to move a mountain into the sea, then it will be done by his willing and available servant.

What it is: Mustard seed faith is complete trust in Christ that unleashes the power of God to do the impossible. Where had the disciples failed? What happened between the successes of earlier days when they reported, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name!"? I believe they began to take their God-given authority for granted to be used when needed against any illness or demon possession that confronted them. With

increasing success came increasing competence and more reliance on self, and less on God. They were treating the authority to heal which they had been given as a magical ability that worked regardless of their faith in him. Does this sound familiar? Simple belief may have been adequate as they began, but with increasing ministry demands there was a need for increasing dependence on Christ. The same is necessary for us. As we place our total trust in God nothing will be impossible for us when we operate within the established will and purpose of God.

Using mustard seed faith means exercising the faith you presently have, not waiting for more.

Faith has only as much power as its object. The faith you have, small or large, when placed completely in Christ is sufficient for the advancement of God's purposes in and through you. In Mark's account of this event we are able to listen in on a conversation that Jesus had with the father of the demon-possessed boy. We will begin reading in Mark 9:21

Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?"  
 "From childhood," he answered. "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."  
 "'If you can'?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes." Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

Jesus honored the faith this man had, knowing he still had some doubts. Jesus did not ask for belief which the man did not have, just what he had. The boy's father placed the faith he had in the Master and saw the impossible accomplished.

This has been the secret of every great work for God that has ever been done through all the twenty centuries of Christian experience – men and women started with the faith they had and saw God accomplish the impossible.

After their failure the disciples' faith was small, but Jesus encouraged them to start trusting him where they were and in time, in the midst of the most difficult tasks they were called to, their faith would grow to such a point that if they needed to cast a mulberry tree into the sea, it would be so.

If Christ were to show up without warning tomorrow at your work place, or your home, or your school what would he see? Would he see you fulfilling your purpose as his disciple, being fruitful in your area of ministry?

Or would he see you as he saw nine of his followers, forgetful of your task, and ineffective in ministry because of a crisis of faith? Then, you, like them, can begin to apply the lesson of the mustard seed.

Only you know what the Lord sees as he watches you each day. And, I can assure you, as

the Lord patiently dealt with his disciples, he will also work with you as you come to him, when necessary, in confession and repentance.

The apostle Paul likened the church to a body, and each of us is a necessary and essential part of the body. As we humbly and prayerfully walk in dependence upon God, exercising the amount of faith we have, no matter how small our ministry may be, it will be used to bring glory to God, and encouragement to his Church. Nothing will be impossible for us as we follow Christ and work within his sovereign will and purpose.

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