

Because You Have So Little Faith

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Matthew 17:14-23

This Bible passage is about faith. Yes, there is a healing here. Yes, a demon gets cast out by Jesus' miraculous power. But this miracle story is an occasion for Jesus to say something about faith. At the most basic level this story is a challenge to our faith. Jesus is frustrated with the disciples. He's not impressed with the level of their faith and he wants to call them and us to a deeper level of commitment. 'This generation needs more faith!' he says.

Let's take a moment to think about how important faith is for all of us human beings. Let's take a moment to realize how faith functions in our life. We human beings are meant to live by faith. We need faith to function in this world. People who have great faith live with more joy, more effectiveness. People with less faith live in a prison of fear and doubt and cynicism. And I'm not just talking about Christians here. Everyone lives by faith.

Every time you get into your car and go for a Sunday drive you exercise tremendous faith. Your enjoyment of that drive depends on faith. You have faith in the people who designed the car. You trust that they have made a vehicle that is safe and road-worthy; a vehicle that will not explode as you drive, a vehicle that will not fall apart when you reach highway speed. If you are sitting in the passenger seat of this car, you also have faith in the driver. You trust that she knows which side of the road to drive on; that she knows the difference between a red and a green light. You also have faith in the road designers and builders. Chances are on your trip you will cross numerous overpasses and bridges: You trust that all of these are soundly designed and constructed. You have a strong faith in these structures which allows you to drive down the road without worry.

This faith is liberating. This faith is freeing. Imagine something absurd with me. Imagine a Sunday drive with all this faith taken away. What would happen then? Well before you got into the car you would demand that the driver show you the engineering drawings for the vehicle. You would need to examine them before sitting in the driver's seat. You would also want to see the maintenance records to make sure the car was in good shape. Once in the car you would want to make a thorough inquiry about the driver's accident record: How many tickets? How many accidents? And once on the road every time you came to a bridge you would say, "Stop the Car!!!" and you would have to get out and examine the structure more carefully. Does it look sturdy, are the bolts rusty, does the engineering look sound? If you were to take a Sunday drive without faith, you would be a nervous wreck. You would probably never take a Sunday drive. The stress would be intolerable.

What is true of a Sunday drive is true of the whole journey of our lives. We are meant to travel through this world, to drive through our life, in a Spirit of faith. Because there are all sorts of unknowns and uncertainties on this journey. And faith is the thing that allows us to live with these uncertainties with joy and hope. Faith is the thing that allows us to live joyful productive lives in the face of uncertainty.

Think about it; most of the really important choices we make in our lives are made in faith without us really knowing for sure if we're doing the right thing. How do we know what job we should have? How do we know for sure the person we should marry? If my child is acting out, what's the best way to discipline her? Should I have this major or that major? Should I stay with my boyfriend or should I break up with him? Am I working too hard or not hard enough? How do you know the real answers to any of these questions? How can you be sure of the right decision in any of these cases? You can't be sure! It's not like you make these decisions without any knowledge or any understanding, but there will always be uncertainty left over, and for that uncertainty you need faith. On the journey of life if you need to have certainty before you made any decision, you would never leave the house. You would never get out of bed. You would be paralyzed with fear.

It is faith that turns fear to joy and allows us to live with uncertainty. When you know that the journey of life is not a journey you take alone. And for us Christians that faith is particularly deep and rich. For us Christians our faith is founded on something good and eternal. We have a good and gracious God as your companion on this journey. This God promises to watch over us as we go, and he promises to bring our journey to a good end. It allows us to live our lives with joy and confidence.

This passage says more about faith. It suggests that the working of God's power in the world is related to our faith. This passage goes so far as to suggest that without faith, God's power is stifled in the world. When our faith is small we limit what God can do in the world. Not that God can't work without us, that would go too far. But clearly God prefers to work through our faith. God chooses to work his power and blessing through our faith. The witness to this truth is overwhelming: In this passage the reason the Epileptic boy could not receive the grace of healing was because of the disciple's lack of faith. In Matthew 13 Jesus is unable to do many miracles in his hometown because of their lack of faith. In Matthew 9 a woman is healed when she sneaks up on Jesus and touches him. What is it that saves her? "Your faith has healed you" says Jesus. And in the Old Testament the blessing of God to the nations is tied to the faithfulness of God's chosen people. Abraham is unfaithful in Egypt, he lies about his wife, and Pharaoh's whole household suffers disease. By contrast the faithfulness of Joseph brings blessing to the houses that he lives in in Egypt, both Potiphar and Pharaoh. Great faith on the part of God's people opens up the possibility of God doing great work.

We sometimes get nervous about saying this sort of thing. It feels like we are preaching a health and wealth gospel. We get nervous because there are these people we've heard on the radio and on TV who will tell the world that we can have anything we want from God if we only have faith. We can get God to do whatever we want if only we have enough faith. If we have a disease we want cured, all we have to do is muster up the requisite faith and God will cure. If we are in financial trouble, all we have to do is summon up the requisite amount of faith and the money will come rolling in. If we are frustrated with our lives and want more success, all we've got to do is drum up some more faith and success will be ours. And we have rightly found this sort of talk offensive.

BUT, please realize that saying greater faith opens up the possibility of God's doing great work is not the same as saying great faith will get us our heart's desire. Great faith allows God's will to be done through us, it does not compel God to do our will. Faith is like a sail on a sailboat. In order to have the power of the wind work for you when you are sailing you need to put out a sail. And of course the bigger the sail the more benefit your boat will receive from the wind. But your sail does not control the wind. The wind blows where it wills and you can neither predict its course. The wind is the master. The wind is in control. And yet it is only with the sail open can you experience the thrill, the joy, the power of sailing. So, in this story Jesus is challenging his disciples and challenging us to spread our sails wide, to trust him, to enjoy the adventure of faith.

But it is exactly here where I start to get discouraged. Because exactly here I see so clearly the weakness of my own faith. I have so many doubts. I have so many questions. There are so many times when I am afraid. "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain move and it will move from here to there." says Jesus. All you need is this tiny bit of faith and miracles can be accomplished through you, says Jesus. And immediately I know that no miracles have ever been accomplished through me. I have never got a mountain to move. I have prayed for healing for all sorts of people who were not healed. I have said prayers for many broken relationships that remain broken. A thousand times I have asked some version of the disciple's question here: "Why couldn't we drive this one out?"

And what about you? When you hear Jesus say 'it takes faith as small as a mustard seed to move a mountain,' do you hear that as an exciting promise? Or does it remind you of the weakness of your own faith?

For all of us who know the weakness of our own faith. For all of us who have strong doubts and big questions that keep tormenting us, this passage brings not only a challenge, it brings comfort. The comfort becomes clearest I think when you let this story remind you of another story in the Old Testament. This healing miracle is in Matthew, Mark and Luke. And in all three gospels it follows directly after the story of the

transfiguration. That's the story where Jesus goes up on the mountain with Peter, James, and John and he appears there with Moses and Elijah in a cloud of glory. Commentators agree, the transfiguration is meant to remind us of another story of clouds and glory on a mountain, namely the story of the giving of the law on Mount Sinai in the book of Exodus. Everyone agrees that those two stories are parallel.

But now let's extend the parallel to the stories that follow these mountain top experiences: What happens as Moses comes down from Mount Sinai to the valley below and the rest of the Israelites? What does Moses find? He finds unfaithfulness. He finds the Israelites worshiping the golden calf. That parallels our story. Jesus comes down the mountain and finds weak faith. Both stories find unfaithfulness in the valley below the mountain. In Matthew, Jesus expresses frustration over these fickle people, "How long will I have to put up with them? In Exodus the Lord is also sick of the people. 'I'm going to destroy them and start a new people' he threatens.

And then how does that frustration resolve itself? In Exodus do you remember the result of the golden calf incident? Do you remember what happens to the people when Moses gets back? Moses and some of the Levites take up swords and slaughter 3000 people for their unfaithfulness. There is punishment. There is shedding of blood for their infidelity. And how does our story end? Also with the promise of bloodshed, only this time the one who pays the price is a little different: "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him. And on the third day he will be raised to life." This time the unfaithful people don't pay the price this time Jesus pays it for them. In all three synoptic gospels this story of unfaithfulness ends with Jesus predicting his death. And it's as if he's saying, 'this time I will pay the price for your unfaithfulness. This time I will overcome the weakness of your faith. This time I will lay myself down for this lost generation.'

Doubt and uncertainty are unpleasant. Someday, in the new creation when we see Christ face to face, we won't doubt anymore. We will have the certainty of Jesus presence. But in the meantime, we will always live with the weight of our uncertainty.

Even John Calvin has admitted as much. Calvin says that we are partly unbelievers until we die. Commenting on Mark's version of this passage, where the Father of the boy says, "I Believe, help my unbelief!" Calvin says this. "Lord, I believe. He declares that he believes, and yet acknowledges himself to have unbelief. These two statements may appear to contradict each other, but there is none of us that does not experience both of them in himself. As our faith is never perfect, it follows that we are partly unbelievers; but God forgives us, and exercises such forbearance towards us, as to reckon us believers on account of a small portion of faith.

So sure, this story reminds us of the weakness of our faith. And we know that most of aren't mountain moving saints. And of course Jesus wants more from us. We know it. But in the midst of our uncertainty, the good news is that when we cry out, "Lord have mercy on me sinner," he has mercy. And when we cry out, "I believe, help my unbelief." He helps us. And when we say, "Jesus I'm losing my grip, please hold on to me," he holds on tight. That's not enough faith to impress anyone, but because of Jesus, it's enough for the power of God to begin changing our lives.

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