The Gospel According to Matthew

XLI. Little Faith vs. Mustard Seed Faith

Matthew 17:14-27

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Two weeks ago, we heard Peter confess the great truth of the Incarnation – of the Word being made flesh and dwelling among us in Jesus. “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,” Peter had exclaimed.¹ Then last week, we witnessed the Father’s confirmation of Jesus’ divine identity. “God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all,” writes John.² And there upon the Mount of the Transfiguration, John and Peter and James witnessed as the full light of Jesus’ divine identity was – for a brief moment – fully revealed to them. “And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun”³ – confirming for them that Jesus was indeed, “God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God,” as the Nicene Creed puts it.

This morning, we witness the other side of the mystery and miracle of the Incarnation: we glimpse the full measure of Jesus’ humanity. Not only “God from God,” but also, says the Creed, “truly human.” As Jesus descends from the mountain after His Transfiguration, immediately He is approached by a man who kneels before Him and says, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic . . . I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him.” And Jesus is fit to be tied: “O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?” Jesus is angry. Jesus is frustrated. Jesus is put out with His disciples, who seem to be making no progress at all, despite the long length of time they have been with Him and the increasingly short length of time remaining before His crucifixion. In other words, Jesus has “had it up to here” – and in this moment of frustration at this particular failure of His disciples, we are given the privilege of seeing Jesus acting human the way we are human, feeling frustration just the way that we often feel it.

But the reason Jesus is so frustrated with His disciples’ failure to heal the boy is what leads us to what this passage really is about. You see, the reason Jesus is so angry and frustrated with His disciples and their failure is because way back in Matthew 10, He had given them the power and the authority to heal diseases – like the epilepsy of this boy.⁴ He had already given them everything they could have possibly needed to have been able to heal this boy – hence His frustration. But also, hence the disciples’ question to Jesus after His explosion of frustration and His subsequent healing of the boy: “Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, ‘Why could we not cast it out?’” And Jesus, a little calmer now, says to them, “Because of your little faith.” In the Greek original, that is actually one word, not two: “littlefaith.” It’s almost like Jesus is calling them a name: “Because you are a bunch of ‘littlefaiths.’”
I suspect that the disciples could only lower their heads in shame as Jesus called them “littlefaiths”. But what Jesus said to them next must have been more than a little confusing: “For truly, I say to you, 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.” Now Jesus had talked about mustard seeds before – using them as a parable of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom, like a tiny mustard seed, may seem to be small and unpromising – but then it grows from that small beginning into a great and mighty tree.\textsuperscript{5} But here we can see how this statement about faith the size of a mustard seed must have been confusing to the disciples. Jesus has just accused them of having little faith. And now Jesus turns around and says that if they only had faith the size of a tiny mustard seed, they could move mountains. Do you see the confusion? Little faith vs. mustard seed faith?

But little faith is clearly a bad thing. And mustard seed faith is clearly a good thing. So what is the difference between little faith and mustard seed faith? Since both are small, one possible and even popular interpretation of Jesus’ teaching about faith here is ruled out – it is not a matter of us having more faith. This is not an exhortation that we should have more faith, bigger faith. In other words, this is not a command that we should try harder, work faster, strive more diligently to be good Christians – such that then, and only then, we will be able through the power of our now big faith to do the great things for God that we previously couldn’t do. Jesus isn’t saying that; He isn’t saying try harder and then you will have a big enough faith to do big things. Nothing against trying harder to be a good Christian, but that’s not what Jesus is saying here – because both little faith and mustard seed faith share the same quality of smallness. So what, then, is the difference?

Well, to be honest, Matthew’s telling of this story kind of leaves us hanging in regard to that question. If you look carefully at your Bible, you will note that our passage skips directly from verse 20 to verse 22 – verse 21 is omitted. There are reasons for this: verse 21 does not appear in some of the earliest and best manuscripts we possess of Matthew’ gospel. But that omitted verse does appear in Mark’s version of this story. And it is this verse that provides the answer to our question about the difference between little faith and mustard seed faith. In Mark, Jesus concludes His speech to the disciples by saying this: “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.”\textsuperscript{6}

And there is our answer. The difference between little faith and mustard seed faith is not a difference regarding the size of our faith. But rather it is a difference regarding how connected our faith is to active relationship with the Living God – prayer. It is not a matter of how much we believe in God; rather it is a matter of how connected we are, in the course of our daily life, with the presence and person of God. Little faith knows things about God; mustard seed faith spends time in God’s presence through prayer. Little faith constantly talks about God; mustard seed faith continually talks with God. Little faith seeks to be powerful on its own; mustard seed faith acknowledges its weakness and relies entirely on the power of God. To quote the title of one of my favorite books: “Small Faith – Great God”\textsuperscript{7}!

Think of it this way – this is a way of defining discipleship that comes from the Jewish tradition around the time of Jesus. Remember that story where Jesus is at the home of Martha – and Martha is bustling around in the kitchen trying to be a good hostess, and she gets all put out at
her sister Mary who is not helping her one bit, but instead just sitting there at Jesus’ feet listening to Him teach. Remember that story? That description that Mary is “sitting at Jesus’ feet” is actually a technical description of the relationship between a disciple and his or her rabbi. To be a disciple, in that day, was described as “sitting at the feet” of a teacher. Paul, for example, describes his early training in this way: “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up at the feet of Gamaliel . . .”

This image of “sitting at the feet” is a powerful one – it means that to be a disciple was to choose to be with, to sit at the feet of, a teacher as often and as closely as one could. So that one could not only hear the words of the teacher, but also watch how the teacher handled the ordinary events of daily life. It was to become so close in relationship with the teacher that you breathed the same air, began to think the same thoughts, live the same sort of life. There was a Jewish blessing that comes from the time of Jesus which expresses this idea beautifully: “May you always be covered by the dust of your rabbi.” In other words, may you follow your rabbi so closely, intimately, that the dust his feet kick up as he walks coats your clothing and covers your face. “May you always be covered by the dust of your rabbi.”

And this, I think, is the difference between little faith and mustard seed faith. This is what Jesus is pointing towards when He connects mustard seed faith specifically to prayer. That the difference between little faith which has no power and mustard seed faith which can move mountains is not that of the size of our faith, but rather the measure of how deeply our faith is connected to a personal relationship with our God, to an intimate and constant connection between our daily lives and the eternal life of the Living God. Just believing in God, knowing some things about theology and the Bible, says Jesus, produces nothing of note – it is little faith. But daily, hourly, minute-by-minute relationship, conversation with the Living God – no matter how strong or weak our knowledge and belief – this is mustard seed faith and it can move mountains. It can move mountains not because our faith is so big or so strong, but because it is continually connected by prayer to the God who is so big and so strong. Little faith talks about God; mustard seed faith talks with God. Little faith asks “What would Jesus do?”; mustard seed faith turns to God in prayer and asks, “Jesus, what do you want me to do?” Little faith goes days, even weeks without visiting with God in prayer; mustard seed faith is covered with the dust of the Rabbi and talks to God throughout the course of each day. In fact, when you think about it, this is kind of interesting: last week, the voice of God in the Transfiguration said to us, “Listen to Him.” This week, the voice of Jesus is telling us, “And also talk to Him.” Listen to Him, talk to Him – this is the substance of real faith, this is the dynamic back and forth of mustard seed faith, the sort of faith which can move mountains. And think also of how this redefines the way we think of prayer: prayer not as something we do, but rather as Someone with whom we listen and talk!

The difference between little faith and mustard seed faith is measured by the closeness of our daily connection to the One in whom we place our faith. And that business about mustard seed faith moving mountains – let’s neither forget that, nor get carried away with it. It doesn’t mean, as the false prosperity preachers would suggest, that if you have faith in God, you can get anything you want – just name it and claim it! No – remember the context of our story. The issue at hand is the failure of the disciples to heal the boy with epilepsy – in other words, their failure to do the work of the Kingdom. Moving mountains, therefore, is not about getting whatever we want; rather it means being able to do the work Jesus Christ has called us to do in this world for His sake – it
is about our being the sort of Christians who do the sort of things daily which bring glory and honor to the name of Christ and which serve to hasten the coming of the Kingdom of God. Each individual act of mustard seed faith may seem not to move mountains. But add them up over the course of a lifetime, multiply them by the number of all the faithful of every time and every place – and suddenly we begin to see how God uses our faith, even faith the size of a mustard seed, to prepare the way for the coming of His Kingdom on earth; to make straight in the desert of this world a highway for our God, in which every valley shall be lifted up and ever mountain and hill made low, the uneven ground level and the rough places smooth, until that day when the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.12

In fact, let me share with you a story about mustard seed faith moving mountains and preparing the way for the Kingdom of God. One of our members sent this story to Christie and me just this past week, and has given us permission to share it with you:

I am a Registered Nurse. I work for a hospital system doing Pre-Surgical assessments for patients scheduled for surgery. I basically get their medical/surgical history, including medications, and give pre-op instructions prior to them meeting with the anesthesiologist . . .

On November 8 . . . my last patient of the day was a woman in her mid-50’s. She was very pleasant when she walked into the assessment room. I started my questions, and when I got to her medications she seemed a bit embarrassed that she was on a mild anti-depressant and an anti-anxiety medication. She went on to explain that her father had recently died and not long after her brother committed suicide. She was the one to find him, which was very traumatic. After that, she had trouble sleeping and was having trouble dealing with two losses so close together. She went on to say how angry she was with her brother and that if he was standing in the room at that moment she would slap him in the face.

I stopped my assessment questions for the moment and allowed her to continue. She obviously needed to get this off her chest. I told her it was ok to be angry. I said that she is probably angry because he didn’t come to her for help. He acted like nothing was wrong and that he was picking up the pieces of his life . . . There was no way for her to know what was really going on in his head. We talked about God and religion and how killing yourself is considered a sin. She said she wondered where he was. This really seemed to bother her the most. I told her that I was sure God forgave him and welcomed him to heaven. Jesus died for our sins so we could have eternal life. I’m sure God knew he was troubled . . . She finally apologized for dumping this all on me. She said she has never really talked to anyone about this before and she wasn’t sure why she did it then. I told her that I believed God made our paths cross for a reason. I believed that God was speaking to her through me. I actually almost started to cry because at that moment
I realized God [had] used me in a very special way to help heal someone’s heart. This patient was so grateful and when I got up to leave the room she stood and asked if she could give me a hug. I was going to ask her the same thing!

God is amazing!

God is so amazing. But just as amazing is the fact that God desires to use you and me and our mustard seed faith to be instruments of His healing purpose in this world, to be the means by which He moves the mountains of human brokenness in order to prepare the way for the coming of His Holy and Healing Kingdom. That’s why Jesus got so upset with His disciples and their “little faith” – because what is at stake in the difference between little faith and mustard seed faith is nothing less than the hastening of the coming of the Kingdom of God. And He is counting on His disciples. He is counting on their mustard seed faith. He is counting on you and me.

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1 Matthew 16:16.
2 I John 1:5.
3 Matthew 17:2.
4 Matthew 10:8.
5 Matthew 13:31-32.
6 Mark 9:29.
10 John Ortberg, God Is Closer Than You Think (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), p. 54.
11 Matthew 17:5.
12 Isaiah 40:3-5.