

Mustard Seed Faith

Matthew 17:14-21

¹⁴When they came to the crowd, a man came to him, knelt before him, ¹⁵and said, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; he often falls into the fire and often into the water. ¹⁶And I brought him to your disciples, but they could not cure him.” ¹⁷Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him here to me.” ¹⁸And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was cured instantly. ¹⁹Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” ²⁰He said to them, “Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.”

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It was a common pastoral error, but an error nonetheless.

Having seen the readiness of church members to explore and grow in their understanding of God’s blessings and God’s call upon their lives, I set about finding a person who could facilitate a discussion group.

After considering a number of members, I decided that one held high potential: she

- was interesting,
- was a people person,
- had a great sense of humor
- had unrealized potential (as a person and as a Christian)

So I approached Carol and put my position as pastor to work. She was resistant at first, but I would not easily be deterred. I answered each of her reservations with confidence that she could do this new, spiritual thing.

In time, she relented and reluctantly agreed. I was elated...for several days.

Then she called with an upset audible in her voice. She said “I just can’t do this.” I accepted her “no”.

As I think back on it, my error was subtle, but critical.

I’d talked with her about what she could do and the real issue was not that at all. She probably was right:

- she had no teaching experience,
- she had been an active church member but never made growth in faith a priority
- one of her primary roles in her family was the person who provided comic relief

and so this call to lead a discussion group was out of her skill set, and was inconsistent with much in her life.

I can imagine that some may have said “Carol is leading the discussion group!?”

But we were both mistaken on this point: while Carol was not naturally equipped to be the discussion group leader, I am convinced that God would have used her abilities and her capacity to learn and grow to make her an excellent discussion group leader. And she would have grown in her understanding of faith and in her leadership skills.

My approach should have been to say, “I believe that God can use you in this powerful way.”

You don’t have to be Billy Graham; the Holy Spirit rejoices in you being Carol and will work through you to accomplish God’s good plans. That is just what the disciples discovered.

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Jesus had given the disciples authority over demons and while Jesus, Peter, James and John were on the mountain top, the others were left to slog in the valley and attempt some healings.

And in these two stories (Jesus’ glorious mountain top transfiguration and the healing of the boy with epilepsy) we see enacted that “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”¹

Jesus doesn’t build a cabin retreat to perpetuate the mountain top experience, he returns to the valley of suffering humanity and there gets on with the work of healing.

That was where Jesus walked and that is where the Spirit moves in our day as well. And it is our comfort that when we find ourselves in dark valleys, that we can have confidence that although an unpleasant and undesirable place in life, it is the very place where we can expect to bump into God.

What the disciples bumped into was that while they were empowered to undo the demonic, they could not do it. They stood in the face of the boy’s life endangering symptoms like muted school boys.

In such moments we feel so tiny and powerless when compared to the need in our face:

We greet bereaved family after a tragic death and have no words of true comfort
We deal with a child’s dysfunctions knowing that our caring is not enough
Facing a major challenge we have no courage
In the face of an ongoing life challenge we feel drained

My pastoral error and the disciples error is our error in such situations is that we tend to look to our ability and recognize that it is not enough.

Our critical need however is not for ability to run faster or jump higher; we need to remember to turn to Jesus and to put our trust in him.

¹ John 3:16

In the Acts of the Apostles we read about Peter and John going to the temple at the hour of prayer – 3 p.m. (for me the lowest energy time of the day). And there a man lame from birth was being carried in.

People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. ³When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. ⁴Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, “Look at us.” ⁵And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. ⁶But Peter said, “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.” ⁷And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. ⁸Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.²

Peter often failed the pop quiz, but he passed the final exam.

It's not about what we don't have (there is so much of that); it is about what we do have in Jesus Christ – his power at work through us.

And so, Jesus said, you only need a mustard seed portion of faith and even with that God's power can be at work through you.

In his typical memorable way, Jesus made the point. A mustard seed is a tiny seed. Someone said that a small aspirin bottle would hold 189,000 mustard seeds, I would guess that our water bottles would hold ½ a million mustard seeds.

In the end, the matter is about trusting God's ability to use us for good.

The assumption of this passage is that the gospel in all its rich and life enhancing blessings is for you. You are a critical and vital part of God's gracious will. But the kingdom of God is much bigger than anyone of us. God intends to bless you and then to work through you, if only you have faith the size of a mustard seed.

Can we be healers?

We likely cannot...but God can work healing through you and me.

Your friendship with another person can repair soul shattering isolation.
Your care for another person can renew their ability to trust others.
Your understanding can help them take the next steps toward forgiveness.
Your loving and timely challenge can help them get on with their life.
A small course correction now can save them from life destroying decisions.
Your acceptance of them can convey God's acceptance of them.

God can even use your life story. Your question can help others understand their questions. And your life insight can enlighten others' journeys.

² Acts 3:1-8

Not long ago I was taking part in a group discussion when someone said, “after my divorce I resolved to be self-sufficient and not need anyone.” Then one night when everything seemed to be falling in on me, I realized “I can’t do this alone.”

And it was as if a dozen people paraded in front of me saying “Me too; I resolved not to need anyone, not even God.”

God can and does use us in wonderfully creative ways.

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So what can we take from this Scripture?

First is that you have potential that includes your natural gifts and abilities, but so much more. God can use powerfully a life offered for humble service. “Use me, Lord, for your good” is the prayer that comes out of this Scripture lesson.

Secondly, we must remember that because it is not our power, but God’s power working through us, our job is to stay connected to God. Jesus said, “apart from me, you can do nothing”.

If you have email, you can receive daily devotions or daily scripture readings.

And we’ve talked about praying 3 times a day.

Jesus’ solemn promise is that “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit…”³

Brad and Bev and our education committee have planned some wonderful opportunities for you to stay in touch with God. Next week, for example, we begin a study called “The Life You’ve Always Wanted”. It’s about ways Christians can be connected with God and allowing God to work in us and through us.

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While our state legislatures wrestle for a budget, and our congressional leaders debate wise health care reform, God is deploying men and women in every neighborhood and home and in each place of work. And without any budget at all, they will change their corner of the world by allowing God’s power to be at work in them and through them.

Great (and small) wonders will be done this week by everyday people. God intends that you’ll be one of those people!

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Today’s Scripture reading did not end with a success story of the disciples’ applying and succeeding with future healings. Rather it is something of an unfinished story. Will the disciples get the message? Will they stay connected with God so that God can work through them? Throughout history those questions have been answered over and over again in the positive for those who have faith only the size of a mustard seed.

³ John 15:5

But this week that question will be answered through you and me.

Don't close the door to opportunities for good because you think it bigger than you or beyond you. Stay connected to God and stay open to what God may do through you.

The world needs you and God is ready to work through you!