

“Faith Moves Mountains”

Sermon by Lisa Crismore

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Matthew 17:14-20 When they came to the crowd, a man came to him, knelt before him, and 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. And I brought him to your disciples, but they could not cure him.’ Jesus 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.’ And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was cured instantly. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, ‘Why could we not cast it out?’ He 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.’

It was about 18 years ago this coming December. I was driving over to a friend’s house to pick-up my daughter, Sarah, where she had spent the night. Bethany, my other daughter, had a friend spend the night at our house. They were in the backseat of the car. My friend had just recently moved to a new house and I was unfamiliar with the area. It had started to snow. I had a thousand things on my mind. As I went to go look for my hand written directions on the seat next to me, I sailed right through a stop sign. The next thing I know this salt truck had appeared right in front of me and I hit him! The t-boned salt truck flipped over on its side, which was amazing since I was driving a little Geo Prism! The car was totaled, of course! We had all been wearing our seatbelts. After being checked out at the hospital, we were all fine. My husband wasn’t angry, which was a miracle! He was just thankful we had come out of it with only a few scrapes and bruises.

But oh was I scared after the accident! I wondered how bad the outcome would have been if I had zipped through the stop sign a few seconds before I did and the salt truck would have t-boned us! It probably would have been fatal. Every time I got into the car I would doubt my ability to drive. I would find myself taking side roads, where there was less traffic. It shook me up, which was a good thing. It definitely made me pay attention.

The disciples today find themselves doubting their abilities to minister to the people. The right-hand men of Jesus have been approached by a father of a young boy, who is seeking to be healed. His son has epilepsy, which was thought to be caused by demons in those days. The boy would have terrible seizures that would make his body tremble badly. His parents had to watch him when he was close to the fire to get warm or near water to bathe. They feared for his safety! This father must have gotten word of the healing powers of Jesus. We don’t really know why the disciples were first approached.

It may be because Jesus is not there. This story follows the transfiguration story where Jesus has taken Peter, James and John up to the top of the mountain, where Jesus is transformed into this luminous white form. He could be on his way back, coming down the mountain or perhaps hidden in the crowd.

But here the disciples find themselves being asked by a father to heal his child. You wonder what goes through their minds. Earlier in the book of Matthew, the disciples are given their mission, which is “cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons.” They have witnessed time and time again the power of Christ. They have seen numerous healings. They saw him feed the five thousand. They felt the sea calm down after he stilled the storm. It is only a few chapters before this Peter is given the power to walk on water. We don’t know if the disciples are overwhelmed by the request of the father. Whatever the case is, the disciples fail in the attempt to heal the child and it is clear their faith had left them.

Jesus calls them out when he hears of this. We see a more human side of Jesus as he gets very upset with their behavior. He says, “You faithless and perverse generation. How much longer must

I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring the child to me.” He heals the boy instantly! Is this a chance for Jesus to shake them up a bit?

This is not the first time we hear Jesus questioning the faith of the disciples. When the disciples fear for their lives in the storm, when Peter began to doubt and sank into the water and today when they question why they could not cast out the demon, Jesus inquires about their faith.

The disciples seem rather clueless when it comes to faith. Aren't we just like the disciples? We have all experienced the power of Christ. You may have had a life threatening medical emergency where you were healed. You may have survived a car wreck, knowing God's guardian angels were watching over you. You may have gone through a life altering experience such as divorce, a parent diagnosed with dementia, a child born with autism or a dying spouse, where it was only by the grace of God that you were able to get through it. I know we have all held a precious baby in our arms, knowing that this gift can only come from the power of God. Every time we attend a funeral in the life of a believer we have the comfort and we celebrate that Christ had the power over death.

So why do we doubt, if we or we know of others who have experienced all this? Paul Tillich says, “Doubt isn't the opposite of faith. It is the element of faith.” Frederick Buechner writes, “Our faith is on again, off again rather than a once and for all.” (Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith; by Frederick Buechner; HarperSanFrancisco; 2004; p. 109) Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “If everything was perfect and our faith was 100%, the story would not be about us.” (The Seeds of Heaven; by Barbara Brown Taylor; Westminster John Knox Press; 2004) We find that in our everyday lives things get messy. Life is not perfect. Things will not always go our way. We are not perfect. We are fallible. But just like the disciples, we learn that we must hold onto our faith because we realize that we need Jesus.

We must hold onto the promise that our faith though sometimes small will move mountains. When children in Children in Worship learn about the parable of the mustard seed, they find that this seed is very tiny. The leaders have to put it in a zip-lock baggie because once they drop it, it is very difficult to find. But the children learn that if this seed like their faith is planted, watered and given care it will grow and do amazing things!

I find it interesting that Jesus uses children to teach the disciples about their faith. It is a small boy that gives up his 5 loaves and 2 fish to feed the multitudes, when Jesus tells the disciples to feed them. Many children are healed because of the faith of their parents asking Jesus to perform the miracles. It is later in Matthew the disciples must learn that the children must come to him because it is such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs. Jesus relies on the children to teach us about our faith. Children have very little doubt and such strong belief. I know after the accident, which I mentioned earlier. My daughter never had a nightmare. Even after she saw me taken to the hospital in the ambulance, she never refused to get into the car out of fear. Now, I may have heard her small voice in the back seat telling me to make sure I stop at the stop sign! As a child, she never questioned the presence of God. It was as an adult, when the mystery of God and the will of God did not always make sense, is when she began to doubt. I'm sure you can all relate to this.

In less than 2 weeks, I will be back at Rockville Women's Prison for the Kairos Retreat. As a pastor, I am considered clergy on our team. The clergy will sit at the tables with the prisoners and fellow team members throughout the retreat. The other humbling responsibility of the clergy is to be there for one on one counseling sessions with the prisoners. These can be heart breaking as I may hear stories of abuse, rape, drug and alcohol use, child molestation and even murder. These will be things that they may have done but also things that may have been done to them. I have also found that the folks on our team have led very challenging lives and they will also need support throughout these 4 days. I have to be honest and say that this is challenging. Even though this is my fifth time to serve, I still doubt my ability. I question if I can be the peaceful, grace filled

presence of Christ for these women? But I have to rely on what I have seen in the past. It is truly amazing how these women are transformed over the course of the 4 days. I have to believe in God's Spirit being present. Many of the women have said that prison is what saved them.

We all have doubts about things in our lives. Whether they are about serving in a church, being the best parent, spouse or friend, working at being the best team member at our job or whatever the task that is set before us, we will doubt because that is a part of our faith. May we be able to hold onto the promise that what little faith we have will allow us to move mountains, thanks be to God for Jesus Christ, who tells us that nothing will be impossible as long as we believe in the will of God. Amen.