FAITH AS SMALL AS A MUSTARD SEED

Matthew 17:14–27

Key Verse: 17:20

“He replied, ‘Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, 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.’”

Have you ever felt overwhelmed? Or like what was being asked of you was way too hard? Sometimes we try to do something, and we fail at it badly. Then we feel ashamed. In today’s passage Jesus’ disciples face some situations like this. Though he’s trying to help them accept the way of suffering, he’s also teaching his disciples lessons in faith along the way. Today we especially want to think about Jesus’ teaching to have faith as small as a mustard seed, how we can have such faith, and how we can exercise it. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

Verse 14 begins, “When they came to the crowd…” Jesus and his top three disciples Peter, James and John had just been up a high mountain all by themselves, where he was transfigured. A special light from that experience may have still lingered around them for a bit. Now, as soon as they came down the mountain, they encountered a crowd. Somehow these people figured out where Jesus and his disciples were. What else happened? Verse 14b says, “…a man approached Jesus and knelt before him.” He’s kneeling out of deep respect for Jesus. And what does he say? Look at verse 15. “‘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.’” The Greek word for “seizures” here is literally “moonstruck.” Ancient people thought that under the influence of different phases of the moon some people would go crazy. Those who had our modern disease of epilepsy were thought of that way. But in this boy’s case, he would not only have irrational seizures, but also get them right at the time when he was near a fire or near water deep enough to drown in. It suggests that there was a more sinister element in what was going on.

And then there’s one more element to the story. Look at verse 16. “I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him.” While Jesus and the other three were on the mountain, the other nine disciples were approached by this man, no doubt with all the townspeople following. But why would this father think that Jesus’ disciples could help? Probably it was because Jesus had already sent out his disciples to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, and drive out demons (10:8a). News spread that not only Jesus but also his disciples could heal. This man probably came looking for Jesus, but when he found only nine of his disciples, he was sure they could do something, too. It doesn’t say they refused to help him; it says “they could not heal him.” It means the disciples tried, but it didn’t work. Perhaps they tried one by one. The first, most confident one said, “Step aside! Let me do it!” When he failed, his competitor made a big smile and said, “Well, I guess I must.” When he too, failed, only one more was willing to give it a go, and alas, he failed, too. Then the others’ faces became dark. It was a moment of sheer humiliation for Jesus’ disciples before all those expectant people.

But it was an even tougher moment for the father. We can only imagine how his heart sank each time one of the disciples failed to heal his boy. The boy must have had bruises, gashes and burn marks all over his body from the many previous episodes. The father experienced not only the pain of watching his son suffer from such self-destructive behavior, but also the helplessness of being able to do absolutely nothing, and, of seeing others fail at helping his son, too. At painful moments in life, when it seems there’s no hope, it’s so hard to know what to do. It’s so hard to know what to say. We might guess many things about this father. But one fact is clear: at least he brought his son to Jesus, even after the disciples had failed. Their failure didn’t cause him to lose hope in Jesus.

How did Jesus respond to him? Read verse 17. Wow! Those are some fierce words! Jesus was always so kind, so patient. It’s unusual for him to ever express such frustration with people. Why doesn’t he want to stay with them or put up with them anymore? Is he just too irritated with their rude behavior? No. To understand his words, we first need to think about where Jesus had just come from. He’d just been transfigured in heavenly glory high up on the mountain. It was an experience of the glory, power and honor of God. But now, having come down the mount, he was again confronted with human agonies, troubles and failures. It was hard for him, knowing the mighty power and glory of God, to bear with people whose minds were so far away from God, whose lives were slowly and steadily being ruined.

So Jesus laments, “You unbelieving and perverse generation.” It’s a strong rebuke. Why does he say this? Jesus sees the problem at its core. It’s not the boy’s surface symptoms. It’s not the disciples’ failure. It’s not the father’s weakness. It’s the whole generation. Jesus says it’s an unbelieving and perverse generation. It means people are living as if God were not there. Ever since the Fall of Adam and Eve, human beings have been driven from God’s presence and have inherited a sinful nature. Our sinful nature causes us to rebel against God. Our sinful nature makes us think we can do great things without God, that we can build our own lives without him, and glorify ourselves. Our sinful nature even causes us to mock God and his people and all that relates to him. When people freely live according to their sinful nature, the world becomes more and more unbelieving, so much so that most people naturally absorb from it a godless mindset, thinking and living every day as if God were not there; God never even crosses people’s minds. The word “perverse” means to be actively deviant from what is considered moral, right, proper and good. It seems that being unbelieving comes first, and then comes the perversion. Living in a perverse generation everything seems upside down. People call evil good, and good, evil. In such a world, people get so confused. We become numb to what’s right and wrong. Everything seems so relative, and there are no longer any absolutes. Children who have to grow up in such a world can so easily get lost. It’s really tragic.

But there seems to be more to Jesus’ rebuke. Why is he being so harsh? We can understand it in the bigger context. He’s been ministering for three years. He’s healed all kinds of incurable diseases. He’s shown so many miracles. He’s expecting people to have an ongoing, sustainable faith in him by now instead of needing more miracles to believe. Back in chapter 11 he already had rebuked the towns in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent (11:20–24). He’s not been doing miracles again and again just reacting to problems as they came. And, he’s not able to stay with these people forever. He’s been performing miracles to lead people to have independent, personal faith in him, a faith that would last, a faith they could exercise after he was gone. He especially was expecting more from his disciples.

It tells us that though we still live in an unbelieving and perverse generation, we can’t blame all our problems on the environment around us. Even in the worst environment, we can have faith in God. We can exercise our faith in God even in the bleakest situation. As we live by faith, believe from our hearts and exercise our faith from day to day, even in something as simple as personal prayer, we become a believing influence to the people around us.

Jesus said, “How long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?” Jesus was always ready to bear with human weaknesses. Being fully human, he fully understands all our agonies. He knows we’re likely to fail again and again, and he has immense patience. But the one thing he finds really hard to bear with is our unbelief. Even though we may have so many problems and so many weaknesses, he just wants us to believe in him. If only we have faith in him, he’s happy to stay with us.

Finally, Jesus said, “Bring the boy here to me.” The boy’s sickness seemed incurable. The nine disciples had failed. But those things didn’t deter Jesus at all. He was sure he could help the boy not because he was so self-confident, but because he had faith in God Almighty, the God who’s greater than all the problems and all the powers of evil. When we follow him, Jesus wants us to have this same conviction.

What happened? Look at verse 18. “Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed at that moment.” It was instantaneous. This verse tells us that it wasn’t epilepsy; it was a demon causing the boy to self-destruct. It also tells us that when people are unbelieving, demons can come in and have a free-for-all. On the other hand, the best protection against the intrusion of evil in our lives is to have faith in God. Finally, we see again that Jesus has authority over any evil power or any problem.

Look at verse 19. “Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, ‘Why couldn’t we drive it out?’” Obviously they’d been so ashamed of their failure. It’d probably caused them to lose all faith that anything could be done for the boy. But Jesus, with one rebuke, instantly cured him. They wanted to know what they were doing wrong in casting out the demon. Jesus was completely straight with them. Look at verse 20a. “He replied, ‘Because you have so little faith.’” In this case, their failure came from too little faith. What does it mean? It means that when they tried to help the father and heal his boy, they weren’t thinking about God who can do everything when we depend on him. They were thinking about themselves. They were trying to prove something about themselves. Perhaps they were even trying to gain glory for themselves and compete with one another. Jesus fully expected that by now, his disciples would be able to exercise their faith without him being physically present.

It’s an important theme in Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus repeatedly calls his disciples “you of little faith.” He said “you of little faith” when their hearts were full of worries about their material needs (6:30). He said “you of little faith” when they were overwhelmed by a storm of life (8:26). He said “you of little faith” to Peter when he was walking to Jesus on the water but starting looking at the scary waves (14:31). He said “you of little faith” when the disciples were thinking again about having no food (16:8). Jesus’ words are a rebuke to us, too: “Because you have so little faith.” We may think we have many problems—money, or people, or health, or situations. But really, our problem is too little faith.

Read verse 20b. “Truly I tell you, 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.” What is he trying to say? He’s teaching us the power of faith. We don’t need great faith. We need even just a tiny bit. Jesus says even a mustard seed sized faith has power to move a mountain. It tells us that faith has great power. Why does it have such power? It’s because faith reflects who God is. God is almighty. He can do the impossible. When we trust in him and depend on him, he can use us to also do the impossible.

But how can we have faith even as small as a mustard seed? We may need to start with changing our way of thinking. Faith is about not quantity but quality. Faith also is not just about getting impossible things done in our lives; it’s about who we believe in—the object of our faith. We can have faith in people, or in things, or even in ourselves. But we really need to have faith in God, faith that God is almighty, God is present everywhere, and God is all-knowing. Genesis 1:1 says, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” He’s still there. He’s still the Creator God. To have faith as small as a mustard seed, we need to turn our thoughts away from ourselves, people and this world to the God who made us and all things. The more we think about him, the more we can have genuine faith, and the more problems and people shrink down to their proper size. To have faith as small as a mustard seed, it’s good to pray. When we believe in God, we should act on it. We should pray about our real life problems. We should step out in faith in real life when things seem impossible. The more we act on our faith in real life, the more our faith becomes real.

In verses 22,23 Jesus again re-focuses his disciples on what he’s really trying to teach them. He doesn’t just want them to be healers or mountain-movers; he wants them to accept his suffering, death and resurrection, and go the same way of suffering in following him.

In the last part of today’s passage is a story unique to Matthew’s Gospel. Peter is confronted by people trying to collect the temple tax. According to their records, Jesus and his disciples were late in paying it. To cover for them, Peter immediately promised that Jesus would pay it. When he arrived in the house, Jesus brought up the matter without Peter even saying anything. Jesus first taught him about their true identity. They are children of the King. So they are exempt from all kinds of legalistic laws. As God’s people we have real freedom in Jesus. But Jesus also taught Peter not to cause offense and to pay the tax. It means we are not to abuse our Christian freedom, but act in love toward those around us. Finally, Jesus tells Peter to go to the lake, throw out his line, and in the first fish he catches there will be a four-drachma coin. It means God will miraculously provide exactly what his children need when we depend on him. It’s another illustration of faith as small as a mustard seed.

Today we thought about faith as small as a mustard seed. We need such faith not only to face various kinds of mountains in our lives, but also to help people who may seem as troubled as the boy in this passage. And we need such faith to live among people who impose their expectations on us, believing God will take care of us. May God grant each of us faith as small as a mustard seed.