

THE DIFFERENCE A LITTLE FAITH MAKES

Scriptures: Matthew 17:14-20; 21:18-22

Jesus and three of his disciples come down from their mountain top experience where Jesus appears in glory with Moses and Elijah—they come down from that experience and immediately they are back in the world of problems. A man begs Jesus to heal his epileptic son saying, “I brought him to your disciples, but they could not cure him.” Jesus says, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I put up with you!”

That is not how we were taught to respond in pastoral care classes. If I had been in this situation, I would have handled it completely differently. I would have said, “Here, let me help,” and I would have tried to help the boy without putting other people down. And later when the disciples, full of embarrassment and disappointment, said, “Why could we not cast it out?” I would have said, “It’s okay. At least you tried. Ministry is like that. You win some and you lose some.”

Wouldn’t you rather have me for a pastor than Jesus? Sometimes Jesus seems, well, not very pastoral. Like when he tells the disciples that they failed because of their little faith. Statements like that have inflicted a lot of pain on Christians. On numerous occasions I have talked to people who prayed over and over for healing that never happened. Then, to make matters worse, someone came along and said, “Well, it’s because you did not have enough faith. If you had more faith, the healing would have happened.” How hurtful is that! On top of illness the person now feels guilt.

Then comes another puzzling statement by Jesus. He says, “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.”

I am told that last week in the adult Sunday School class studying Matthew that asked this question: “What is the difference between little faith and the faith of a mustard seed?” That is just what I am wondering. The whole point of a mustard seed is that it is small. A mustard seed is tiny. So why does Jesus in one breath tell the disciples that their faith is too small, and in the next breath say that they only need faith the size of a mustard seed? How much faith is enough? What kind of faith does it take to be a successful follower of Jesus?

On the back of the bulletin I have collected all the places in the gospel of Matthew where Jesus describes great faith and little faith. If you look at the examples under each heading, it is sometimes hard to tell the difference. In fact, the first thing that occurs to me is that whenever Jesus is talking to an outsider—like a foreigner or someone who would have been considered unclean, he praises their faith, and whenever he is talking to his own disciples, he puts them down. It’s like a coach who encourages the other kids on the team, but is always ragging on his own. And maybe that is Jesus’ pastoral style: to encourage the people who are most likely to feel low and to put down those who are most likely to feel proud and privileged.

But there is something else that distinguishes these two groups. All the people in the top list are motivated by hope. In Matthew 8 the centurion comes to Jesus from some distance away because he is confident that Jesus can heal at a distance. His trust in Jesus' power gives him hope that Jesus can heal his servant just by saying the word.

In Matthew 9 the friends of the paralyzed man show their faith in a different way. If their faith had been like the centurion's, they would not have brought their friend to Jesus on a stretcher, they would have just asked Jesus to say the word. If Jesus could heal the centurion's servant from a distance, could he not also have healed the paralyzed man just by saying the word? But in this case the effort of the friends shows the depth of their faith. Carrying their friend to Jesus reveals the depth of their hope that Jesus can help him.

My favorite example is the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15. When she begs Jesus to heal her sick daughter, Jesus says, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." There is Jesus flunking pastoral care again. If I had been the woman, I would have started looking for another church. But the woman says, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." The woman persisted because she knew that Jesus had enough bread, enough love, enough power to go around for everyone, including her. She had enough hope in Jesus not to give up.

Great faith is motivated by hope, and hope comes from believing that Jesus' power is not limited—that Jesus can heal at a distance, that Jesus can make the unclean clean, that Jesus has enough power and enough love to go around for everyone, even a Canaanite. All these people had hope that Jesus could help even them, and their hope was not disappointed.

Great faith is born of hope. In contrast, little faith is motivated by fear. The first four examples of little faith are united by one characteristic. There is no atmosphere of hope in these stories; instead there is fear that freezes the disciples in their tracks.

Take the story in Matthew 8. The disciples are in a boat with Jesus on the Sea of Galilee. A storm comes up. Jesus is asleep. That itself says something about Jesus' faith in God's ultimate control. But the disciples have no such confidence. They wake Jesus and say, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" Give them credit. When in trouble, they turn to Jesus. But they turn to Jesus not out of hope but out of fear, a fear that has paralyzed them.

The same is true of Peter in Matthew 14. During another storm on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus comes to the disciples walking on the water, and Peter asks to step out of the boat and walk with him. That is more faith than I would have. But when he steps out on the water he notices the wind and becomes frightened, and begins to sink. Like the disciples in Matthew 8 he cries out to Jesus, "Lord, save me!" To his credit Peter turns to Jesus, but he is driven to Jesus not by hope but by fear, a fear that has paralyzed him.

The next story in Matthew 16 comes right after Jesus has fed thousands of people with only a few loaves of bread and fish. That story in itself is revealing. Jesus says to the disciples, "I think we should feed this crowd, lest they faint from hunger on the way home." But the disciples say, "We can't. We only have a few loaves of bread and fish."

Do you see the difference between faith motivated by hope and faith motivated by fear? Fear is helpless. Fear says there is not enough. Fear says there is nothing we can do.

I suspect that is what happened in our scripture for today from Matthew 17. When the man brings his son to the disciples for healing, they say we can't do it. Maybe they tried and maybe they didn't. We are not told. But if they tried, they soon quit. I think that is what made Jesus so frustrated. As soon as he leaves, they give up. If he is not around, they suddenly become helpless. Their faith makes them more aware of what they can't do than what they can.

The problem with fear is that it freezes us. There is a Peanuts comic strip where Lucy says to Linus, "You look worried." Linus says, "I am worried! We're having a test in school tomorrow, and there is no way I can pass it. Absolutely no way!" Lucy says, "Have you tried studying?" Linus says, "We're having a test in school tomorrow, and there is no way I can pass it. Absolutely no way!"

That is the problem with fear. Fear paralyzes us, just like it did Peter, just like it did the disciples. Fear paralyzes but hope empowers, like it did the Canaanite woman, like it did the centurion, like it did the friends of the paralyzed man.

Let me pose this question: Is your faith motivated more by fear or by hope? Does your faith make you more aware of what you can't do, or of what you can do through God's grace? That's the difference between little faith and great faith.

But here is the good news. Jesus can work with both. Did you notice that? When Peter and the disciples are scared to death by the storm, Jesus chides them for having little faith, but he still intervenes to save them. And when the disciples think there is not enough bread for everyone who needs it, Jesus chides them for their lack of faith but he supplies them anyway. Even when the disciples seem to have little faith, it is not zero faith. They may turn to Jesus out of fear, but at least they turn to Jesus, and in every case Jesus comes through for them.

That is why Jesus says all you need is faith like a mustard seed. The point is that you don't need great faith, all you need is a little faith. All you need is enough faith to turn to Jesus, because Jesus can still work in your life even if you are afraid, even if you have lost hope, even if you feel paralyzed by your inadequacy.

A couple years ago I heard Anne Lamott give a lecture at Whitworth University. She said, "Courage is fear that has said its prayers."

Friends, great faith is little faith that has said its prayers. Great faith is little faith that is still praying, still trying, still open to what God can do in our lives. The failure of healing in your life is not a sign that your prayers lack faith; it is a sign that you need to keep praying. Because the ability to keep praying, the ability to keep trying, the ability to keep making yourself available for God's use, is precisely what makes faith great.

- Ken Onstot
February 14, 2010