

MOVING MOUNTAINS BY FAITH
(Matthew 17:14-20)

Today begins the sermon series I promised for this summer. The theme, you may remember, is “Gee, I wish Jesus hadn’t said that!” We’re going to look at a few of his hard sayings, things he said that tend to be a bit off-putting, at least to me. This is my list, but you may well have your own least favorite saying of Jesus, and if you do, let me know, and if it’s not already on my list I just might be able to fit it in.

This sermon may begin a new series, but it’s also a follow up to the sermon from three Sundays ago, which I’m sure you all remember. But just in case you were out of town that weekend, it was a sermon about doubt and the text was a verse from the last chapter of Matthew where Jesus appears to the disciples after Easter and it says, “When they saw Jesus, they worshipped him; but some doubted” (Mt 28:17). On the way out of church, one of you said he had waited years to hear that sermon and suggested that it called for a sequel. So here it is.

Let’s start with today’s reading.

There are a couple of things going on here. There’s the exorcism, of course. But there’s also the disciples’ embarrassment when they can’t do it themselves. They tried to drive out the demon but they couldn’t. Then there’s Jesus’ explanation for why they failed: because of their little faith. Ouch! But Jesus doesn’t leave it at that. He goes on to describe the power of faith: “If you had 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” (Mt. 17:20).

It seems to me that what Jesus is saying is that the disciples let doubts get in the way, that doubts curb their effectiveness.

Have you ever prayed for something – really, seriously prayed for it – and nothing happened? I don’t mean for something frivolous, like winning the lottery or the Red Sox beating the Yankees, but for something important, like for a loved one to beat cancer or overcome an addiction. How would you feel if someone said you didn’t get what you prayed for because you didn’t have enough faith? You might feel like smacking them, and I for one wouldn’t blame you.

But isn’t that exactly what Jesus is saying to the disciples, that they tried to do something really good, that they prayed for this boy to be healed, and they might as well have saved their breath? If you had just a little faith, he says, you wouldn’t need bulldozers or dump trucks. You could rearrange the landscape by simply saying the word. Or take it a step further. If you had just a little faith, you could close the hospitals and just pray for people.

Well, if that’s what Jesus is saying, all I can say is I wish he hadn’t. I don’t need to be told that my faith is somehow deficient because I can’t pull off a miracle, not even a very small miracle.

Maybe I'm just showing my own doubts or lack of faith, but I know there are some things that are impossible for me, no matter what Jesus says. So where does that leave us? We have our faith, which may not be much bigger than a mustard and which leaves plenty of room for doubt. We may not be moving mountains but we're limping along, doing the best we can.

Let me suggest a couple of things that might help.

First, we shouldn't deny our own doubts and we sure shouldn't bully people who express their doubts. Thirty years ago a Gallup poll found that a staggering number of people avoid church precisely because they're convinced they can't find one where they're free to explore their doubts. But a third of them said they "would be back in the Christian fellowship if they could find a pastor or church friends with whom they could easily and openly discuss their religious doubts" (quoted in Martin Copenhaver, *Living Faith While Holding Doubts*, p. 97).

Maybe and maybe not. It's easier to give the "right" response to a survey than it is to climb out of bed on Sunday morning. But the Gallup survey gave other options that might be important to church shoppers, like good preaching, working for a better society, having a good church school and youth program, and none of those factors came close to being able to explore doubts. In fact, being able to explore doubts was more than twice as important as any of those other factors. That was the No. 1 thing that unchurched people were looking for.

I hope West Parish is a place where doubts can be openly expressed and freely explored. But maybe we don't do a good enough job encouraging people, unchurched seekers and church members alike, to be open about their doubts. Maybe we have some work to do in that area.

Some churches hire a "resident theologian" to work with the congregation to educate members in the ways of faith. Martin Copenhaver, the pastor of Wellesley Village UCC suggests churches ought to hire a "resident skeptic" to work with the pastor and congregation to help them be honest about what they say and what they truly believe. But then he adds that it's really not necessary to put a resident skeptic on the payroll because every congregation already has skeptics sitting in the pews every Sunday morning. If you're one of them, take that role seriously and don't be shy about it.

It's one thing to honor doubts, to claim them, to express and explore them. But there's still the little matter of how we live with our doubts, or rather despite our doubts. As I said three weeks ago, the disciples who met the risen Jesus in Galilee may have doubted, but that didn't keep them from worshipping him. In the same way, there's no hint that the disciples in today's lesson just hung their heads and gave up because they couldn't cure a sick boy, let alone move a mountain. Jesus didn't tell them, "If you don't even have faith the size of a mustard seed, you're no good to me, so beat it."

There's always a kind of tension between faith and doubt. Jesus didn't expect his disciples to resolve all their doubts before they joined his little band, and neither should we. And the flip side of that is this: having doubts is no excuse for not trying to live a Christian life. We can live whatever faith we have, whether it's big or small, even while we have doubts.

Rainer Maria Rilke's advice to his young poet friend is good advice for us:

[H]ave patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love *the questions themselves*...Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer (*Letters to a Young Poet*, pp. 34-35).

If we do what a believer does, then maybe we will come to believe what a believer believes. As Martin Copenhaver says, "People need both to act out the belief they cannot yet claim and to talk out the doubt they cannot yet escape" (*Living Faith*, p. 101).

Most of you know that Don Nickerson filled in for me more than once when I was away. Don always gave me a copy of his sermon, and one of the things I appreciated – and I suspect you did to – was his honesty about the doubts he brought with him. But if you know Don, you know his doubts never got in the way of his living the best Christian life he could.

It turns out Jesus wasn't the only one in the New Testament to speak of a faith that can move mountains. The apostle Paul had something to say about that kind of faith, too. In his first letter to the Corinthians, in that passage that's become a staple at weddings, he says, "If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing" (1 Cor. 13:2).

Faith ultimately isn't about what we believe; it's about what we do. We can't simply decide one day to eliminate our doubts, but we can decide to act in spite of them. We can't choose to believe in God, but we can entrust ourselves to God through faith. We can't will away our doubts, but we can put our trust in God despite those doubts. We can't choose to have the convictions of a believer, but we can choose to act like one. Even faith the size of a mustard seed is enough to let us commit ourselves to worship and serve God in the hope that eventually we will come to believe more fully in the God we worship and serve.