

# JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

## How Much Faith is Enough?

Matthew 17:14-21

Sunday, July 3, 2022

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Rodin was a famous French sculptor who is considered the pioneer of modern sculpture. The story is told that one day Rodin saw a huge, carved crucifix beside a road. He immediately loved the artwork and insisted on having it for himself. He purchased the cross and arranged to have it carted back to his house. But, unfortunately, it was too big for the building. So, of all things, he knocked out the walls, raised the roof, and rebuilt his home around the cross.

That's the thing about Jesus. He's just too big to be contained by our modern lifestyles and philosophies. Very rarely does his message fit in with how we think life should operate. This does not mean we haven't tried to cram him in to our culture. Oh we have. Over the years, authors, spiritual gurus, motivational speakers, celebrities, moralistic salesmen, and even preachers have tried really hard to make Jesus fit into the comfortable houses we have built. Sports figures have said that if Jesus did ministry today he would be the greatest quarterback. Businessmen say he would be the greatest CEO or salesman. Even ministers who see themselves as being on the cutting edge of ministry say Jesus would be the greatest visionary leader and would be Lead Pastor of a mega church. We have tried to fit Jesus into all kinds of categories that affirm the way we live.

The only problem is that if we actually start reading the New Testament and look at what he really said and did, we find that he does not fit into any of our comfortable categories. In fact, most often he obliterates our categories and embodies a radical message that is intended to transform us into his disciples. We find that we have to rebuild our lives so that he can fit.

And let's be honest, most folks don't want to hear that. We don't want to hear that we must rearrange our lives and priorities around Jesus. Most want Jesus on their own terms.

Peter Gomes, the insightful preacher of Harvard University's Memorial Church, tells of a famous cartoon that appeared in *New Yorker* magazine. The

cartoon shows a well-dressed couple leaving church after saying nice things to the preacher at the door. The wife, covered in furs and jewels, says to her well to do husband, "It can't be easy for him not to offend us."

I laughed out loud when I read about that cartoon, and I laughed because of the truth of it. It is rather funny when I think of what I do up here every Sunday. My job is to preach the gospel. And that sounds nice, it sounds good. This is what you expect me to do, and this is what God has called me to do. But when I read the gospels that contain the gospel teachings of Jesus I realize once again how dangerous my job really is. Because the gospel is not meant to confirm; it is meant to confront and that is dangerous business. Who likes confrontation?

Let's face it. Most people do not go to church to be confronted with the gap between who they are and what the gospel calls them to be. Most people come to church because they crave confirmation of the status quo, of what they already believe, of what they are already doing. This fact sometimes spoils the good feelings I get when folks compliment my sermons. I am human like the rest of you, and it feels good to receive compliments. I recall recently someone telling me how much they liked a sermon I preached. I asked, "What did you like about it?" They replied, "I agreed with it." And so, it is.

The only problem is that we don't find many people complimenting Jesus' preaching or agreeing with it. In fact, the first time Jesus got up to preach in his hometown, he almost got killed. The people he grew up with were so offended they tried to throw him off a cliff! How's that for sermon feedback? Jesus had a knack for rubbing people the wrong way.

For example, take our scripture lesson for today. A desperate man runs to Jesus in the midst of his disciples and a big crowd, kneels before him and says, "Lord, have mercy on me. My son has epilepsy, and suffers terribly. I brought him to your disciples and they couldn't help. Please help me."

And what did Jesus say? He doesn't say, "There, there." He doesn't hug the man and tell him everything is going to be alright. What does he do? He takes the opportunity to insult his disciples. "Are you kidding? You faithless and perverse generation! How long do I have to put up with you? How long do I have to deal with you? Bring him here." And then he heals the boy. And I can hear John whispering to Peter in the background, "I think Jesus needs to work on his people skills."

Well, the disciples have egg on their face. After the crowd leaves, the disciples ask Jesus, "Why couldn't we heal the boy like you?" Jesus replies, "Because your faith is small. You have so little faith. If you have faith as small as a mustard seed you can move mountains. Nothing will be impossible to you." And the disciples look at each other in amazement, "Is he serious?"

I must admit that I feel sorry for the disciples. I see them running after Jesus as he teaches and preaches and heals, taking notes on what he says and does. I see them conferring with each other on what they think he meant when said this or said that. I see them scratching their heads and sometimes shaking their heads in astonishment. But if I had been one of the disciples this little incident with Jesus would have sent me to a boil. "Here I am. I left my job and family to follow this guy. I try to understand everything he says and do everything he tells me to do. Then he embarrasses me in front of this crowd, and then he tells me my faith is small?!"

I once knew a couple in another church I served who had a very sick daughter. They tried everything to help her. They went to all kinds of doctors. They went to all kinds of specialists. They had her on every prayer list you could think of. They prayed for help and guidance every day. Nothing worked. They were so desperate that they took her to a famous faith healer. He tried to heal her, but he couldn't. When they asked him why, he said to the couple, "You just don't have enough faith."

There was a minister who tried to start a new church. He was filled with vim and vigor. Planned well. Strategized well. Had people praying for him. For two years he preached his heart out, pastored his heart out, but the church never grew. It had the same 20 people coming that it had started with. The denomination behind him pulled the plug. When he met with his supervisor, the supervisor said to him, "This new church start should have never failed. You need to evaluate your faith."

Is this really what Jesus is trying to tell us? That if we can't seem to pick a mountain and move it, it is because we don't have enough faith? That if we can't seem to overcome an obstacle we don't have enough faith? That when we fail it is because we don't have enough faith? Really? I mean, my theological training won't allow for such an explanation. We can't explain a lack of faith on everything. This is a sinful world, so bad things happen. Sometimes circumstances are beyond our control. Sometimes life throws us things that cannot be resolved by simple faith.

This is a complicated world that requires more than religious pabulum. If you want something done, you have to work for it. If you want a problem solved, you have to save, plan, strategize. If you want to accomplish something, you have to have the skills and talent to do it. If you want to change the world, you need money and resources to do it. We could do without the answers of the self-help coaches and religious gurus telling us it is about belief and faith.

So, if we are honest, it is a bit unsettling to overhear this conversation Jesus had with his disciples today: "You don't have enough faith. If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can move mountains! Nothing will be impossible for you." Really, Jesus? Let's be real.

And yet here we are in church with a Bible on our altar, a Bible here in the pulpit, that says over and over that faith is essential. Here we are showing support of scripture that says, "Without faith it is impossible to please God," "The just shall live by faith." Here we are believing in a man who said, "Your faith has saved you. Your faith has made you well. O ye of little faith. Where is your faith?" And, of course, "If you have faith you can move mountains, nothing will be impossible to you!"

Do we really believe it is that simple? Well, maybe on Sunday mornings we believe that. But when we go back to school, work, or our regular routines on Monday, it is hard for us to live by faith. The just may live by faith, but most of us live as if the smart live by an agenda.

There they were in a church meeting planning a new ministry. They had some of the smartest people in the congregation gathered around a big table for 3 or 4 hours. Everyone was teeming with fresh insights and

creative ideas. It was exciting. They had a timeline planned out. They had their goals to meet written out on a white board. This was going to revolutionize how the church would do ministry. They were ready to adjourn the meeting. Then a member of the youth group who had been quiet the whole meeting raised her hand and said, "Don't you think we need to pray about all of this. We forgot to pray at the beginning of the meeting. At youth we always pray before our meetings." The leader of the meeting said, "Good idea. Bow your heads. Let's say a quick prayer. It's late."

They were in a budget meeting. You know how budget meetings are. They had their work cut out for them. They discussed and argued all night. "Where are we going to find the money? How will we raise the money? What are we going to do?" Then someone had the audacity to mumble something about faith. And then there was the reply, "Well, the church is a business just like anything else."

Controversy had hit the church hard. There were rumors spreading all over the place. Many people had left the church in disgust. "Too much change in too little time" people would say. The pastor was angry at this group. This group was angry at that group. The denominational powers that be called a meeting to hear everyone out to help bring peace and resolution to this conflict. One influential man got up and complained about leadership and decisions that were made, and all the changes. Then he ended his rousing speech with, "Not in my church! Not in my church!" And many people applauded. Would it surprise you to know that the name Jesus or the word prayer was never mentioned in that meeting?

Faith seems really simple. Faith seems really easy. But the truth of the matter is faith is really hard. That's probably why we find Jesus' words today so offensive, so outrageous. Faith in hard work – you bet. Faith in our best made plans – absolutely. Faith in what we can see – sure. Faith in our resources and money going to where we think it should go – yes. Faith in our agenda – of course. But faith in something beyond our control, faith in a God who is bigger than us, faith in a power that is greater than our agenda, huh well, let me get back to you on that.

God, yeah, God's not bad when you are in trouble or you have exhausted every resource, but putting God in charge of your life, of your decisions, of your resources, of your money, that's for the fanatics. I guess that is right. It takes a fanatic to believe in Jesus because Jesus was a fanatic. He was fanatical enough to have faith in God.

I remember meeting a person with faith. He was one of those people that seemed to live his life and ministry with very little effort. Everything he touched turned to gold. I shared the platform with him one time at a speaking engagement. He had overcome obstacle after obstacle in his life to get where he was. He was extremely successful in what he did. I had never heard a person like him before or knew someone who touched people the way he touched people. I must say I was very curious about what made him tick, and what made him so successful and effective. I told him that I would like to join him for lunch and pick his brain. Well, we got our food and sat down at the table. I had my questions. Where did he go to school? Where did he go to church? Who were his mentors? What was his secret? He said, "Can we pray for our meal, first?" "Right, right, of course. Sorry. I forgot." He took my hand and squeezed it, and you know what he said? You know what he prayed? I couldn't believe it. It was the simplest prayer. One I heard a million times, but I had forgotten. He prayed, "Not my will, Lord, but yours be done. Amen."



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