

The Power of the Son of Man
Matthew 17:14-27

Now, this is more like it! This is the Jesus that Peter and the rest of the disciples had signed up to follow, the Jesus Who could cast a demon out of a boy with just a word, the Jesus Who knew exactly where to find a fish that had swallowed a coin worth two days' wages. Or who knows? Maybe He told the fish where to find that coin as well!

And we even get a glimpse of the Jesus Who was willing to defy the edicts of the religious authorities, pointing out as He did to Peter that the sons of the King are in fact exempt from Temple taxes. Yes, it's no wonder that the disciples wanted to follow this Jesus – the Son of Man Who had power over the natural world as well as over the supernatural world, the Jesus Who stood up to the corrupt political and religious leaders of the day. And since the disciples had been tagging along after Him since the start of His ministry, well, didn't it stand to reason that at least a little of His power and authority would trickle down to them?

And when we look at verse 20, we might be tempted to share in some of that excitement. For didn't Jesus say that nothing would be impossible for us? Didn't Jesus promise that if we have even a tiny amount of faith we could tell a whole mountain to move? Isn't that what those "prosperity gospel" preachers keep telling us? So, why shouldn't we believe them? Why shouldn't we just speak what they call a "word of faith," naming and claiming whatever we want, taking full advantage of the power that Jesus says we have?

Well, before we imagine that we can just recline in our easy chairs while doing some landscaping, we might want to take another look at the context of verse 20. For notice that Jesus doesn't speak these words in an atmosphere of congratulations, complementing His disciples on their successful exorcism. No, just as He was the one Who had to rebuke and expel the demon, He had also rebuked His disciples. And what had He called them in verse 17? "O unbelieving and perverted generation." And why had He said they had been unable to help this demon-possessed boy? Because of their unbelief, because of their lack of faith.

And of course, the preachers of the prosperity gospel seize on this point to explain why so many of the promises they make to us don't come true. Oh, sure, you may have laid your hand on the TV and you may have sent in the donation they requested. But the reason you don't have that Cadillac you want in your driveway is your own fault – you just don't have enough faith. So, maybe you need to demonstrate more faith by sending in a larger gift!

Yes, it's easy to laugh at their materialistic folly. But don't we Evangelical Presbyterians wonder about the same sort of thing? Many of us have prayed and prayed for chronic sicknesses to be healed, or for prodigal children to turn back to God. And all too many of those prayers seem to have gone unanswered. So, is the problem with us? Is there something wrong with our faith? Or do we just not have enough faith?

But wait – didn't Jesus say in verse 20 that we only need faith the size of a mustard seed? That's not much, for it was the smallest seed sown by the farmers of that place and time. Surely we have that much faith. Surely even the deluded followers of the prosperity preachers have that much faith – I mean, they sent in a check, didn't they?

And the disciples obviously had at least that much faith as well. After all, they knew Who Jesus is – in the previous chapter they had confessed that He was in fact the Messiah whose coming they and their ancestors had been awaiting for well over 400 years. And way back in chapter 10, Jesus had

specifically given them authority over unclean spirits. And verse 16 says that they had in fact tried to perform the exorcism this boy's father had requested. So why would they have tried to cast out the demon if they hadn't had faith that their Messiah had given them power to do such an amazing deed?

So, what gives? What was wrong with the faith of the disciples? What is wrong with our faith when our prayers go unanswered? Well, as is often the case when we can't solve a theological problem, we are probably asking the wrong question. For the real issue here isn't about the quality or the quantity of our faith at all.

For what, after all, is faith? We usually use that word to indicate some sort of intellectual belief, a mental assent to a certain proposition or statement of truth. But if that's all that faith in Christ means, then the disciples had plenty of faith – they had, after all, correctly identified Jesus as the Messiah in chapter 16. But if that's all faith in Christ means, the demon in verse 18 had faith too – for if it hadn't known Who Jesus really is, it never would have obeyed Jesus and left that suffering boy alone.

So, what is the sort of faith which Jesus accused the disciples of lacking in verse 17? What is the kind of faith that Jesus is talking about in verse 20, the tiniest amount of which can move mountains? It's obviously more than just knowing about God, or even just acknowledging the identity of Jesus as the Son of God – true faith involves trusting God. The important thing about faith therefore is not its amount but its object, not its quality but its focus.

And that just makes sense, doesn't it? After all, in the Disney movie, Peter Pan told Wendy that all she had to do was just think a happy little thought and she could fly. But no matter how firmly you believe the truth of that statement, if you try to jump off of the balcony rail your happy thoughts will only last as long as it takes you to plummet to the floor. For the fact is that even the greatest faith in the power of pixie dust can not possibly overcome the very real power of gravity. No, it's not the amount or the sincerity of your faith that matters: it's where you put it that matters.

Ah, but what if we place even the smallest amount of faith in something that's true, something that's real? I have no idea how an automatic transmission works, but I have faith that when I step on the gas, my car will somehow know when to shift the gears to bring me to highway speed. You may not have the slightest clue about how the internet works, but if you trust it enough to click on the church Facebook page at 11am on Sunday mornings, somehow you'll be able to join in this worship service – if everything works as it should. A little bit of trust placed in the right object can have big results.

Just so, Jesus calls us to place even the smallest bit of understanding and trust we have, not in the amount or quality of our faith, and not even in the promises that He has so clearly made to us, but in Jesus Himself. For if there's anything this passage makes clear, it is that Jesus is the only source of power over the natural and the supernatural world. So it is only by trusting in His power, only by relying on His authority that we can ever hope to accomplish anything at all.

And isn't that what we see in this passage? For notice the complaint of the boy's father in verse 16 – "they could not cure him." Of course they couldn't – not in their own strength, and no matter how hard they trusted in the authority Jesus had given them. Instead, Jesus told them that if they wanted to perform such an exorcism, they would have to pray to God to cast out the demon. And they would have to rely so completely on God's power that they would have to consider such prayers to be more important even than their daily food. In other words, they would have to place all their faith in God alone, trusting God to do what they so clearly could not.

And we see the same sort of faith required at the end of the chapter, don't we? For Jesus told Peter to do something that was simply impossible – even laughable. After all, have any of you fishermen ever found a coin in a fish's mouth? How about a \$100 bill? – that's about how much the coin Peter

found would be worth in today's money, you know. To expect that you can pay your taxes by going fishing makes no sense at all. But Peter's willingness to do something that is quite frankly ridiculous, shows us what it really means to have faith in Christ – it means putting His Word ahead of our own reason, our own experience, even our own feelings.

For let's face it – Jesus has told us to do a lot of things that don't make sense or feel right, do they? Don't even look at anyone else lustfully. Don't be angry with others, but take the initiative to settle disputes with them. Instead of seeking vengeance, turn the other cheek. Love your enemies. Deny yourself and take up your cross – those are just a few of the things Jesus has already told us in this gospel. So, if we truly trust Him, if we truly have faith in Him, we have to do what He says. We have to follow Him, even if He tells us to fast and pray, even if He tells us to go fishing for our taxes.

For didn't Jesus also live such a life of radical faith? After all, even though He knew He was the fulfillment of all the sacrifices and rituals that the Temple taxes supported, and even though He was therefore obviously not bound to pay the Temple tax, He paid it anyway, through the agency of a marvelous fish. And why? God's Messiah paid His taxes so that He wouldn't cause offense, so that He wouldn't be a stumbling block or cause a scandal to the pious Jews of the day. Jesus voluntarily curtailed His own freedom, humbling Himself for the benefit of others.

But He went even further, didn't He? For as verse 22 reminds us, even though He was the Son of Man, the One in Daniel's vision, the One Whom God the Father had anointed to have all power in Heaven and on earth, and even though this passage clearly demonstrates His absolute authority over both the natural and the supernatural world, He was preparing to allow Himself to be arrested and beaten and killed. He humbled Himself before God and men, doing whatever was necessary to glorify God and to bring salvation to His people. So, as He went to the cross, He gave us the truest, fullest definition of what it means to live by faith and not by sight, by faith and not by reason or tradition or experience or feelings.

So, what about us? Of course we know that the prosperity gospel is just a modern way of doing what the ancient pagans did, imagining that we can somehow manipulate our knowledge and our prayers in order to get what we want in this life. But if we think we can ask God to move the mountains of fear and frustration, of despair and discouragement, of pain or poverty out of the way just so that we'll all feel better, we are falling into the same trap. For no matter how sincerely we may pray for these or any other things, if we're only concerned with what's good for ourselves and our loved ones, we'll never get what we want. And why? Because we're focused on what we want, not on what God wants, because the focus of our faith, the focus of our lives is in the wrong place. For if we try to pray in Jesus' name without living Jesus' life of humble, self-sacrificial love for God and for others, we'll have just as much success as those disciples did with that demon.

But if we will take the road of prayer and fasting, not insisting on what we want but instead devoting ourselves completely to what God wants, if we're willing to follow Jesus even when He leads us into self-denial and self-sacrifice, even when His commands don't make any sense at all to us, if we're truly placing our trust in Christ alone to provide for us and to protect us, to lead us and to guide us, to be the Lord as well as the Savior of our lives, well, those mountains better put on their dancing shoes. For when our desires thus come into line with God's will, when our prayers become expressions of God's intentions, there's nothing that can stand in His way – or in our way either.

So, will we truly trust in Christ? Will we trust Him enough to obey Him? Will we trust Him enough to follow Him – even to the cross?

Review:

1. We revel in Christ's promises of power and freedom, but we must beware of perverting our faith, trying to use it only to get what we want
2. Christ alone has all power – over the natural world, over political systems, even over the supernatural
3. We can only share in His power through sharing in His humility – doing what He says, no matter how nonsensical it sounds, praying with confession of our complete dependence on Him

Reflect:

1. What
2. choose?

Go further: Read

1. What
2. respond?

Summary and Application:

1. Given?