

FAITH CAN MOVE MOUNTAINS?**MARK 11:12-14, 20-24; MATTHEW 17:14-20**

I'm not sure it's still available, but not long ago you could buy a huggable, washable, Talking Jesus plush doll for \$15.95. Sporting fuzzy dreadlocks and a satiny beard, Talking Jesus was supposed to recite actual Scripture verses to introduce children of all ages to the wisdom of the Bible. When you squeezed the red heart on his sleeve, Talking Jesus said things like, "I love you, and I have an exciting plan for your life," and, "Your life matters so much to me." Those statements, however, aren't exactly from the Bible. In fact, only one of the Talking Jesus doll's messages was an actual Scripture quote: "This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you." (Jo. 15:12 NLT) Maybe that's because many of the things Jesus said were just downright hard or difficult. Hard to understand or hard to accept. That's the theme of our current message series, and today's stories about Jesus' actions and words fit that criteria. Hard to understand and hard to accept. But both of them have a message we need to hear and understand. Let's read the first one. Here's the first message I get from this story and it's not particularly comforting.

BE FRUITFUL, OR ELSE.

This story of Jesus' cursing this poor, innocent, "minding its own business" fig tree happened right at the beginning of Holy Week – the day after Jesus rode a donkey into the city of Jerusalem (what we call Palm Sunday) – and several days before He was crucified and rose again from the dead. What's the problem? What makes this story hard to understand or difficult to accept? Well, frankly, it makes Jesus appear rather childish. It reminds me of how we often react when we run into road construction when we're already running late, or when there's no Wi-Fi available for our cell phones, or when we can or can't get onions on our hamburger depending on our preference. We get peeved, irritated, and annoyed. We pitch a little fit. We say dumb stuff. We react as if the entire universe is supposed to conform to our needs every minute of every day. Isn't that what happened to Jesus here? He was on the way to the temple in Jerusalem and decided to help Himself to some free figs for breakfast, but found the tree had no fruit on it. But surely He must have known it wasn't the season for figs yet. Nevertheless, He cursed the tree and it withered and died. So this is how the Lord of the universe reacts to a petty inconvenience? Just like we do? Really?

Wasn't Jesus also guilty of an illegitimate use of His miraculous power? We've assumed Jesus always refused to use his miraculous powers for His own sake. After all, He refused to turn stones into bread when He was tempted by the devil. He never used His miraculous powers to escape from His enemies. And yet here He used His power to destroy a tree which had disappointed and frustrated Him when He was hungry. To make it even worse, it was an unreasonable disappointment. It wasn't the season for figs yet! Why destroy a tree for failing to do what it wasn't possible to do?

I learned something this week about fig trees that really helped me understand this story better. In that part of the world, leaves first appear on fig trees in late March or early April. They're accompanied by a crop of little knobby things call "taqsh" which is a kind

of fore-runner to the real figs which appear sometime in June. These “fig-lets” or “taqsh” are edible. In fact they’re often a food source for poor people or anyone else who’s hungry. If they’re not eaten, they just fall off before the real fig fruit is formed. And here’s another very interesting fact. If fig leaves appear on a fig tree without these little “fig-lets” (taqsh), that tree will produce no real figs that year at all. An absence of “taqsh” points to a barren, unfruitful, unproductive fig tree. What that means is that Jesus was not being unreasonable by expecting to find something edible on that fig tree at that time of year even though it was too early for actual figs. His hope of finding some “taqsh” to satisfy His hunger was perfectly reasonable. Furthermore, the absence of “taqsh” told Jesus that this specific tree wouldn’t produce any fruit – figs - that year whatsoever. For all of its leafy foliage, that tree was fruitless and unproductive.

Ok, so maybe Jesus wasn’t irrationally annoyed or irritated by this dumb tree, but didn’t He display a kind of childish immaturity, nevertheless? It’s actually easier to believe that Jesus staged here an acted out parable that contained a prophecy about the nation of Israel. Jesus told many stories or parables in His teaching. This story of the cursing of the fig tree was an acted out parable rather than a verbal parable. At no point are we told Jesus became angry at this tree or even irritated by it. That’s an assumption that’s easy to make but isn’t supported by anything in the actual Scripture we read today. Jesus didn’t stamp His foot, pitch a fit, and whine about the lack of “taqsh.” Instead, He saw an opportunity for a teachable moment with His disciples and He provided it.

If this was an acted out parable, what was the point? The message? Like a barren fig tree, the nation of Israel – God’s chosen people at that point in time – refused to bear suitable spiritual fruit and God was about to judge them. Remember, this happened during Holy Week. The whole drama of why God had sent Jesus into the world was coming to its climax. Part of that drama was Jesus’ profound disappointment and sorrow over the fact that most Jews rejected Him as the Messiah. Do you remember what Jesus had said earlier? “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones God’s messengers! How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings, but you wouldn’t let me. And now, look, your house is abandoned. And you will never see me again until you say, “Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the LORD!”” (Lk 13:34-35 NLT)

The whole nation of Israel should have received Jesus with great joy and expectation, but that wasn’t the case. Instead, they were complicit in His crucifixion. By rejecting Jesus as the Messiah, the nation of Israel had earned God’s judgment upon themselves. As a political entity – a nation - they would wither and die. Back in the Old Testament, when God wanted to provide a symbol or a metaphor to describe Israel’s lack of love for Him, lack of allegiance to Him, or lack of producing anything remotely godly, He talked about vineyards that produced no grapes and fig trees that produced no fruit. For example, here’s what the Lord said through the prophet Jeremiah hundreds of years earlier, “I will take away their harvest, declares the LORD. There will be no grapes on the vine. There will be no figs on the tree, and their leaves will wither. What I have given them will be taken from them.” (Jer. 8:13 NIV) When Jesus and the

disciples passed by the same fig tree the next day finding it withered and dead, it was a prophetic sign of what was going to happen to the nation of Israel.

So, is there a lesson in that story for you and me? Is there something I can apply to my life today? Indeed, there is! Be fruitful, or else. I know that might sound rather harsh because we get so focused on God's grace, mercy, patience, and forgiveness that we forget God also has expectations for those upon whom He has showered His grace, mercy, patience, and forgiveness. On the one hand, nobody is saying this morning that anyone gets to Heaven or earns salvation by fulfilling God's expectations – least of all me. We've all miserably failed to meet God's expectations. On the other hand, God most definitely expects those who have received His grace to produce spiritual fruit – to give ample evidence of a changed life and a new relationship with Him – not because we have to, but because it's the inevitable outcome of the Holy Spirit living within you.

Isn't that Jesus' point when He compares Himself to a grapevine and you and me to branches on that vine? "Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. Anyone who does not remain in me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be burned." (Jo. 15:5-6 NLT) Be fruitful, or else. I didn't say it was a comfortable message from Jesus, but it's His words not mine. How else would you interpret these words of Jesus? "A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is chopped down and thrown into the fire. Yes, just as you can identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their actions. Not everyone who calls out to me, "Lord! Lord!" will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter." (Mt. 7:18-21 NLT) Be fruitful, or else.

From those passages – and, frankly, many others – aren't we correct to assume that if my commitment to Jesus never actually makes me better, never actually transforms my lifestyle choices, never makes me easier to live with, never increases my concern for spiritually lost people, never increases my concern for those who are poor and oppressed, and never results in an increased spiritual thirst or hunger for the things of God, of what good or value is that commitment? It's like a barren fig tree – utterly useless. These are simple truths, but we forget all of them too easily. God expects me to be fruitful for Him. God expects me to be spiritually productive for Him. Of course, He's gracious and patient, but let His grace and patience motivate you to bear fruit for Him not provide you an excuse to keep on ignoring or disobeying Him. God is not mocked. Uselessness invites disaster. Lack of spiritual fruit – failing to produce anything of spiritual value and worth – is something God takes very seriously and will not overlook. All the more reason to come to that spiritual gifts seminar this afternoon! 3-5 pm. Can you identify how God has gifted you and are you using those gifts in or through this church or out in the community? Find out how God has gifted you and get busy doing something useful for Him. You'll receive the greatest blessing.

I love the story of an elderly woman who heard a sermon in which she felt God encouraging her to look for ways in which she could use her gifts and situation to

minister to the needs of others. She realized she'd been told by others that she had the gift of hospitality. She lived alone in a small apartment near a large university and had afternoons free. She pondered the needs around her and the people who tugged at her heartstrings. To her mind came the students nearby who were so far away from home. It was then that an idea both strange and simple suddenly arose. She got a stack of 3X5 cards and wrote on each one the following words: "Are you homesick? Come to my house at 4:00 p.m. for tea." She included a phone number and address and then posted the cards all around campus. After a slow start, homesick students began trickling into her house each week for tea. When she died ten years later, eighty honorary pallbearers attended her funeral. Each one of them had been a student who, once upon a time, found a hot cup of tea, a sense of home, and the gospel of Jesus in the hospitable heart of this faithful servant. What's the message of the fig tree? For me, it's be fruitful, or else. How about you? I want you to hear another message both in this story and another story about Jesus we'll read just now.

HAVE FAITH, OR WHY BOTHER?

Jesus made some statements about faith in these two stories that can be hard or difficult to understand. How so? Well, Jesus talked about faith in both stories using some pretty grandiose, colorful language. "Have faith in God. I tell you the truth, you can say to this mountain, 'May you be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' and it will happen. But you must really believe it will happen and have no doubt in your heart. I tell you, you can pray for anything, and if you believe that you've received it, it will be yours." (Mk. 11:22-24 NLT) In the other story we read today, when the disciples asked Jesus why they couldn't exorcise the demon from the boy, Jesus said, "You don't have enough faith. I tell you the truth, if you had faith even as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it would move. Nothing would be impossible." (Mt. 17:20 NLT) At first glance, Jesus sounded like one of those "name it and claim it" televangelists who want you to believe all sorts of weird stuff about faith especially if it involves sending them money. You know what I mean. "Send my ministry \$100 and God will be obligated to turn around and bless you with \$1000." Or, "Just exercise faith in God to heal your body. Don't doubt God because that will sabotage your prayers and you won't get the answer you want."

Jesus' statements about faith here and elsewhere prompt me to ask some questions if nothing else. Like what? Well, was Jesus being literal about my faith being able to get a mountain to move itself into the ocean? When I pray in faith for anything – even foolish, selfish things for myself – is God obligated to answer my prayer just because I exercise faith? How does my faith work with God's sovereignty when it comes to prayer? If I pray in faith and I don't receive what I asked for, is that my fault or God's fault? Can my lack of faith "tie God's hands," so to speak? Can an absence of faith or inadequate faith somehow prevent God from answering my prayers?

Let's answer the easy question first. No, Jesus did not want us to take His statement about moving a mountain into the ocean by faith literally. It was a well know Jewish idiom or figure of speech in Jesus' day. To move a mountain was a colorful way of

talking about removing a great difficulty. Even in English we might talk about a “mountain of difficulties” or not “making a mountain out of a molehill.” Nobody is trying to be literal. So, when Jesus used that imagery, He underlined the fact faith in God or the prayer of faith can accomplish the difficult, the hard, and even the impossible from a human point of view. Faith can access and draw upon God’s power and resources. In a less colorful way, Jesus was saying, “If you have faith in God, all difficulties can be solved, and even the hardest task can be accomplished.”

Here’s a few truths about faith and prayer that these stories underline. For example, there’s a difference between faith for salvation and, what I call, faith for the miraculous or impossible. Every follower of Jesus has to have saving faith. This is when you put your trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins and receiving the gift of eternal life. When the Bible says, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast,” (Eph. 2:8-9 NIV) it’s referring to faith for salvation. But in other places – and the two stories about Jesus today are examples – it’s clear that there’s a second kind of faith we’re called to practice and it’s often associated with prayer. It’s faith in God to do the miraculous or the impossible. It’s complete reliance on God to do something that only He has the power and resources to accomplish.

Here’s another truth. Some Christians have a gift of faith - often demonstrated through prayer - that results in supernatural or miraculous answers. The Bible makes it clear that God’s people have different spiritual gifts or abilities. One of those gifts is this kind of faith. The Bible says, “A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other.... The same Spirit gives great faith to another, and to someone else the one Spirit gives the gift of healing. He gives one person the power to perform miracles...” (1 Cor. 12:7, 9-10 NLT) In my experience this gift of faith is often found in people that just know how to pray. These are the people you want praying for you and with you when you need physical healing, or when you need a spiritual breakthrough, or when you need God to do, frankly, the impossible on your behalf or on behalf of someone else. When those with the gift of faith pray, there’s often a release of spiritual power that comes from God. It’s not them; it’s God working through them. Jesus had this spiritual gift because in both stories we see the miraculous - the supernatural - happen. The fig tree withered and died. The demon possessed boy was healed.

God doesn’t demand great faith from us, just genuine faith. Right here, Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, if you had faith even as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain, “Move from here to there,” and it would move. Nothing would be impossible.” (Mt. 17:20 NLT) There’s a kind of teaching out there with which I disagree. It’s the idea that if you ask God to do something and you don’t receive the answer you want, it’s your fault. You have a weak or an ineffective faith and it’s somehow sabotaging what God wants to do. But here, Jesus suggested that seemingly little “iddy-biddy” faith – by no means, great faith – can be used by God to produce amazing, mind-boggling results. Quite literally, nothing is impossible for those who put even small, mustard-seed sized faith in a great, big God. So ask God for anything and everything. And keep on asking! Over and over again. Have faith! What have you got to lose?

Jesus implied yet another truth through this whole idea of God using your faith to move mountains. God enjoys participating with us in what He wants to accomplish. How does He do that? Well, He motivates us through prayer to exercise faith so that His will can be released into impossible situations. In some cases, God might even withhold the blessing He wants to give – and the answer He wants to provide – until we ask for it through the prayer of faith. I believe Jesus explained that dynamic in another place when He said, “I tell you the truth, whatever you forbid on earth will be forbidden in heaven, and whatever you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven. I also tell you this: If two of you agree here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you.” (Mt. 18:18-19 NLT) Through prayer and through faith, God invites you and me to participate in what He wants to do in this world, in your life, in my life, and in the lives of others. Of course, God could do it all without our prayers or our little faith. But He wants to involve us completely in the release of His gracious will. It’s never a matter of bypassing God’s sovereignty or His will – of somehow getting Him to do something He doesn’t want to do. That really is impossible! Instead, He gets us to pray the prayer of faith, so His will can be released and His purpose demonstrated. And sometimes He won’t release His will until one of His children asks Him to do it. It’s been put like this, “Without God we can’t; without us he won’t.” (Lloyd John Ogilvie)

A follower of Jesus by the name of Dill Rummel tells the story of how a colleague of hers was hospitalized for ten weeks. Her name was Colleen and she had broken her back in two places. Despite the doctors' efforts, her back wasn't healing. Dill was very busy, but she knew God wanted her to visit Colleen. In fact she felt God wanted her to lay hands on Colleen and pray for healing—something that was pretty "out there" for Dill at the time. When Dill finally got around to going to the hospital, she and Colleen chatted for quite some time about this and that. Dill eventually summoned up the courage to say, "Would you like me to lay hands on you and pray for you?" Colleen readily agreed. Dill says she didn't feel warmth dribbling down through her fingers or anything, but she did what God wanted her to do. About three weeks later, the doorbell rang, and there was Colleen standing on Dill's front porch. She explained that the day after Dill had visited her, the doctor sent Colleen to the lab for some X-rays. They showed where the two breaks had been, but they were completely healed. Colleen eventually started coming to a Bible study at Dill's home. One day, when they were talking about that famous painting of Jesus knocking on a wooden door set in a garden. It was meant to depict the door to our hearts. Dill explained that the artist didn't put a door handle on the outside of the door, because we must open our hearts from the inside. Later that day Colleen prayed these words: "Lord, I guess if you're out there and I can open the door, I want you to come in." That day Colleen was born again.

Miracles come in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes it’s a physical healing. Sometimes it’s a spiritually lost person finding Jesus. But it’s always the result of someone having faith and asking God to do what only God can do. God wants you to be useful for Him. God wants to participate with you to accomplish His will. That’s God’s Word for us today. Be fruitful, or else. Have faith, or why bother?