

Little Faith
Matthew 17:14-20
Sermon Preached November 20-21
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I remember the moment that it was all over. I was just outside the 18 yard box on the soccer field. My teammates gathered around me yelling at the other team. The referee stepped in to keep the peace. I was writhing in pain on the ground, but mostly I was confused about what had just happened. My team seemed to think I had been tripped by an opponent or someone had made a dirty play. I was on defense and running to catch up to the play when everything on the field changed directions. As I reacted to the play my body didn't follow suit. At the time all I knew was that my knee was in excruciating pain and I had fallen down. It wasn't until many years later that I found out what happened that day.

After being carried off the field I went to the doctor. He didn't really know what happened to my knee. He thought it might be one thing or another, but suggested that I either quit playing soccer or consider surgery. Well I wasn't about to go under the knife without knowing what was wrong with me, so that was it. The moment it was all over. In time I healed, I could walk, I could run, I could still play other sports, but that day ended my soccer career and my dreams of playing in the world cup.

I've hurt my knee again about a dozen times doing various things

and it wasn't until we moved to Rochester that I actually knew what was going on inside my own body. In one of my more recent injuries playing volleyball I paid a visit to sports medicine. They examined my knee and determined that I have a physiological propensity to dislocate my knee cap. The doctor explained in sort of anguishing language how my knee cap would pop out of place, then back into place. The result is acute pain and my body causing itself to fall down to protect itself from further injury. Over the years I've looked silly by falling down on the basketball court, tennis court, football field, soccer field, volleyball court, and just while walking down the street. I'd just be walking along, step wrong and twist . down I go. So when my doctor could finally explain what was happening in my knee I was thrilled yet fearful that the result would be that I needed surgery.

The doctor explained that in fact I didn't need surgery just some good physical therapy to stretch certain muscles and strengthen others. Over time through physical therapy I strengthened my knee enough to where I've rarely injured it again. But something happened to me that is common in many athletic injuries. I lost faith in my body. Somehow the repeated injury to my knee has created a fear in my mind that won't allow me to kick a soccer ball again. Even though the doctors tell me I should be able to play soccer after physical therapy I just can't convince my body to perform the way it used to before my injury. Today I've asked Heidi Madson who works as a physical therapist to join me in explaining why this can happen to our bodies.

Heidi thanks so much for joining me today as we talk about little faith. My experience caused me to lose faith in my body's ability to perform.

Heidi can you tell us what is wrong with my knee?

Apparently with your numerous injuries and your predisposition for your knee cap (patella) to dislocate you may have a few things going on. You likely have tightness in some muscles and weakness in others and that imbalance leads to instability of the knee cap. You probably need to strengthen your **quadricep muscles** and gluteal muscles and stretch your hamstring muscles and the muscle on the side of your thigh (TFL) and keep doing your exercises!

In your view of how the body works and heals what causes us to lose faith in the body?

We have this amazing, miraculous body created by God and until it gets injured or doesn't work right we largely take it for granted. Once an injury occurs we become aware of really how fragile the body is and we view it in a different light. Even though you may recover from an injury your body has in essence "failed" you and you need to work at trusting it again and gingerly finding out what it can take. You realize the body is not invincible.

Besides sports injuries are there other examples of the connection between the mental, emotional or spiritual side of us

with how the body can function or heal?

Most definitely. I have worked at Samaritan Bethany Heights nursing home for 9 years and had the privilege of working with people in their 80's, 90's, and even a couple people over 100! I have witnessed numerous times how much the attitude affects the outcome. The strong desire to walk again, be independent, or return home can sometimes override the severity of an illness or injury. I worked with a **103 year old man** who was able to return to his prior living situation after a hip fracture. He was motivated, determined and had been that way his whole life. His attitude was a huge inspiration for all of us who worked with him.

How have you seen the power of faith in God affect the patients who you work with either positively or negatively?

A lot of the people I work with have a very strong faith and it is a beautiful thing to see played out in their lives no matter how their body is working.

I work with a lady who has **multiple sclerosis** : she can't see, she can't move any part of her body except her head and she is completely dependent for all cares and activities. Yet she has a very strong faith and believes God can still use her. She dictates encouraging notes to other residents, saves her Bingo winnings to

give to Channel One, and knows everything about football there is to know! She lives life to the fullest of her abilities.

Another lady came in with an arm fracture and was tired of the recent health struggles she had been enduring. She also had a very strong faith and was ready to let go of her earthly body and be with God and her husband in Heaven. We tried working with her for 1 week but her heart just wasn't in it. She went on Hospice and then home to her Heavenly Father....and ultimate healing.

Heidi, thank you so much for joining me today to shed some light on how the body works alongside faith. This helps us to understand that the fundamental element of faith is trust. When we lose trust in someone or something it erodes our faith. We see this in the Bible passage for today when the disciples are not able to drive out a demon from a young boy who was suffering from seizures. Jesus told them the reason, **“Because you have so little faith.”** It's astounding to consider that the men who were the closest to Jesus struggled to trust him, but it's because they suffered from the same malady that we do . little faith. Yet Jesus says in this same passage that if you have faith the size of the very smallest seed, a mustard seed, **“Nothing will be impossible for you.”**

It is a natural part of faith to explore the doubts that we have. Faith and doubt are not mutually exclusive . faith and unbelief are.

Throughout the gospel of Matthew we learn from Jesus teaching on the issue of faith and having little faith. Matthew has painted a picture of the disciples that helps us to see **the symptoms of little faith**. We begin in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6 when Jesus is addressing a whole crowd of people. Jesus is explaining that one of my symptoms of little faith is that **I'm worried**. When we let worry creep into our lives we can let our imaginations run wild with the possibilities of what might happen. This sometimes happens in very serious ways, but maybe more often in simple and somewhat silly ways. Earlier this week the pastors had gathered for our weekly prayer time, then we had a discussion about strengthening marriages and families. We were sitting in the Hyde Room upstairs where just outside the window you could hear the noises of construction going on as the Center is being built. My imagination was running a little wild and I had a mental picture of a giant I-beam swinging out of control, crashing through the building, and killing all of the pastors. Now I could let my imagination turn to worry and I then lose the ability function with faith in God to protect me. This can happen to us fairly easily when we let worry creep into our lives. This is why Jesus addressed worry, because we fail God when instead of trusting him we imagine the many ways that life might go wrong when in fact God's promise is to be our provision and stronghold.

The second symptom of little faith is that **I'm afraid**. When Jesus was sleeping in the boat with the disciples they became fearful

because of the storm they were in. I always read this passage with skepticism toward the disciples. How bad could the storm really be? Were they really afraid for their lives? But that's because I never really spent anytime in a boat. But this summer Phil and Linda Ferguson invited our family to go sailing with them out on the Mississippi River. Their sailboat is incredibly safe. Phil explained to us how it is weighted on the hull so that it would be impossible to tip over. Yet as we were skimming across the water I had this feeling of exhilaration and danger that I now realize that real sailors experience all the time. The peaceful calm of the **Sea of Galilee** can quickly become transformed by a violent storm. Winds funnel through the east-west aligned Galilee hill country and stir up the waters quickly. The winds that come off the hills of the Golan Heights to the east are even more violent. Trapped in the basin, the winds can be deadly to fishermen. A storm in March 1992 sent waves 10 feet high crashing into downtown **Tiberias** and caused significant damage. So we might understand why the disciples were fearful, but Jesus still rebukes their fear and again uses Matthew's favorite refrain, "**You of little faith, why are you so afraid?**" Matthew 8:26

The third symptom of little faith is that **I can't decide**. This comes across when I'm two-minded about something. I have doubts and those cause me to not follow through on a decision. This happened to Peter when Jesus invited him to walk on water. At first Peter was able to do it, but then he couldn't follow through on his

decision and Jesus rebuked him for his little faith. Many times we can become divided within ourselves and unsure of what to do. This indecision leads to inaction as a result of doubt. Faith is an action word. We cannot have faith but not be moved to action. So our inaction, like Peter, shows our doubt and results in us sinking in the water rather than allowing God to make us able to walk on water. Doubt is not an agreeable state for most of us. We would rather leave doubt behind and move forward with faith. For this reason many Christians suppress their doubts. This leads us further into a struggle with little faith.

The final symptom of little faith is that **I don't see as God sees**. This brings us to the Bible passage for today. Matthew has been building a case using the crowds and disciples lack of faith to show the proper response to Jesus. Then we arrive at this story of a boy who needs spiritual healing for a physical ailment and it is disconnected from anything else in the Gospel narrative. There's no reason for it to be placed here at all. As we've seen from Matthew's theme of little faith throughout his gospel this story is not actually told for the sake learning about healing, but instead its focus is on the importance of faith.

There are four important characters in this story that teach us about faith. The first is the man who brings his son to Jesus for healing. He comes with faith that God can heal. He shows his faith in God by coming first to the disciples, but they were not able to heal.

The second character is Jesus who responds to this man's faith by immediately healing his son. This shows us the power of faith in God. The father who came for healing and Jesus were able to see with the eyes of faith the way that God sees what is possible. The third character is not one person but the collective of the disciples who had little faith and were not able to bring healing. The final important character is the collective of the unbelieving crowd who Jesus refers to as the **"unbelieving and perverse generation."** The influence of the crowd plays a huge role on the disciples in this particular case. We are left to wonder why the disciples are unable to perform this healing. It actually calls into question the authority of Jesus as he is the one who sent them out to heal in his name. Jesus's strong rebuke begins with the crowd, and then later he directs it at the disciples. Both groups fail to see the possibilities of faith the way that God sees it.

How often do we too struggle to see with the eyes of faith? Sin causes us to challenge the promises of God, to mistrust him. We join the disciples in their struggle to trust God because we don't see the whole picture the way that he does. The image of darkness and light is frequently used by scriptural writers, reminding us that God is the one who sheds light as we are willing to follow him. **"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."** Psalm 119:105. This helpful image suggests illumination of an area around us while we walk, but not of the entire path. Martin Luther King Jr. said, **"Faith is**

taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." Often the limitations of what we can see or know cause us to be paralyzed from taking the first step of faith.

Even though throughout Jesus' ministry we see him rebuking the crowds, the disciples and even certain individuals for their lack of faith the good news is that these stories are told to give us hope because faith is given to us as a gift from God. So we're ready to turn the corner to discover the **Remedies for Little Faith**. The first remedy is to **recognize that doubt can grow my faith**. We sometimes think of doubt as a terrible sin and that any thinking Christian cannot have doubts. But doubt is a part of the human condition whether we are trying to follow Christ or not. This is because of the real limits of human knowledge and certainty. In our scientific and information age we might like to think that it's possible to know everything, but it's simply not. In 1932 Albert Einstein wrote a letter to Queen Elizabeth of Belgium, in which he commented, "**As a human being one has been endowed with intelligence to be able to see clearly how utterly inadequate that intelligence is when confronted with what exists.**"

When we have doubts in the context of our faith in God it allows us to explore areas of belief where we need to rely more on God or learn more about God's truth. A large part of why we try to deny doubt has to do with how we are taught that faith works. Think about how we understand conversion. One way of understanding conversion

runs like this: what stops people from coming to faith in God is doubt; after wrestling with these various doubts and overcoming them, the way is clear to come to faith. Coming to faith thus happens once all doubt has been cleared out of the way . faith excludes doubt!

It's possible that you came to faith this way. However, most people do not. There is a more reliable way to understand conversion. Many people feel deeply attracted by the gospel, despite their doubts. On the one hand, their doubts are real and hold them back from faith; on the other, the pull of the gospel is very strong and draws them toward faith. In the end, they decide to put their trust in God and in Jesus Christ, despite unresolved anxieties and difficulties. They hope that their doubts will be sorted out as they grow in faith. If you've had a conversion experience like this, then doubt is actually a help to your faith because it causes you to question and eventually grow to trust more in God.

The struggle with faith and doubt should not be lived out in a vacuum. Besides the incredible value of living life alongside other Christians there are many valuable resources to help guide us to grow through doubt. Today I'd suggest a few books that we have at Christos Bookcenter **A Skeptic's Guide to Faith by Philip Yancey**. Yancey writes out of his own search for faith for those who live in the borderland region between belief and unbelief. Secondly, **The Case for Faith by Lee Strobel**. Strobel is a former atheist and well known journalist who writes from an investigative standpoint. He interviews

experts in various areas and brings together cohesive thought about why faith is vital for us. Lastly, **Losing God by Matt Rogers**. Rogers gives us a unique work that deals with the reality of the dark night of the soul that many people struggle through. He delves into issues related to depression and faith and gives very practical insight into working through these challenges. Of course there are a multitude of resources that you can find at Christos and other places. What we must recognize is that doubt is not the enemy in our journey of faith. Doubt helps us to explore the depths of ourselves and our souls to see where God can and will meet us in the same way that Jesus met a father and a suffering boy and brought healing to their lives.

The second remedy for little faith is to **move my focus from the doubting crowd toward our incomparable God**. The struggle that the disciples show in not being able to heal the young boy who is suffering from seizures is largely because they had lost their focus on Jesus and allowed themselves to be swayed by the surrounding crowd. Notice in verse 19: **“the disciples came to Jesus in *private*...”** The disciples needed to get away from the crowd before they could renew their focus on Jesus. We can easily fall into the same temptation of being swayed by the crowd. But what will draw us back to faith is when we turn the focus to God who is beyond comparison. I love this descriptive word for God . incomparable. The prophet Isaiah paints a magnificent verbal portrait for us in Isaiah 40:12-18, **“Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his**

hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance? Who has understood the mind of the Lord, or instructed him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding? Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust. Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires, nor its animals enough for burnt offerings. Before him all the nations are nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing. To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare him to?" Our God is incomparable and that gives us compelling motivation and inspiration to put our faith in him.

The third remedy for little faith is to **fully integrate my faith in all areas of life**. This is the great challenge of following Jesus because Jesus lived a life of integrity perfectly. As we study Jesus' life and ministry we can hold him up as the ultimate example to follow. Jesus never faltered or failed. Jesus was always in step with the Holy Spirit . he was always reconnecting with God the Father. What does this word **integrate** mean? If something has integrity it means that it is the same through every part. Think of the **Hoover Dam** . We certainly want every part of this giant structure to have the same construction, material and strength. Otherwise a small hole could

have catastrophic consequences.

Where faith and doubt meet in our lives we sometimes struggle to live with integrity. My wife Cassie and I have good friends who shared a struggle with integrity. He is a youth pastor and his wife grew up the daughter of a pastor. They were both raised in churches that were particularly focused on keeping the rules of the Christian faith. So on their honeymoon when they were far from everyone they knew, they enjoyed breaking a lot of those rules of their faith. Our faith shouldn't be about keeping rules. Faith in Christ that is alive and vibrant will delve into doubt and come out on the other side more fully integrated into life. But it is good for us to ask ourselves the difficult head and heart questions about our faith. Am I the same believer in Christ when I'm at home as when I'm at work? Are there people in my life who cause me to lose integrity in my faith? What are ways that the integrity of my own Hoover dam is strengthened?

Jesus invited his disciples over and over again to look at their own faith and find that it was little. But knowing that if you have faith the size of a mustard seed nothing will be impossible for you we can join with the father in this story by kneeling at Jesus's feet to say, **"I do believe; help me to overcome my unbelief." Mark 9: 24**

Let us pray.