



THE CHURCH OF THE
RESURRECTION
WASHINGTON, DC

COMMON VISION

Matthew 17:1-23

Dan Claire

January 27, 2019

“Why couldn’t we cast it out?” the disciples asked Jesus.

“Because of your little faith,” he said. “For if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, then you’ll be able to move mountains.”

Is that what Jesus said? Did he really say (in Matthew 17:20), “if you have faith as *small* as a mustard seed?” Some modern Bible translations (e.g. New International Version) have Jesus saying exactly that. Yet if that’s what Jesus said, then he wasn’t making any sense. On the one hand, Jesus clearly said that the disciples’ inability to heal the boy was due to their little faith. It would then be nonsense for him to commend that they have faith as *small* as a mustard seed.

In fact, Jesus did not say, “if you have faith as *small* as a mustard seed...” The Greek text of Matthew does not have the comparative “as small as,” because Jesus wasn’t comparing sizes of faith. Rather, he was saying something different. Here’s a more accurate translation:

“Why couldn’t we cast it out?” they asked him.

He said to them, “Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like 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.” (Matthew 17:19-20)

What Jesus was saying about faith is key to our common vision. To better understand his meaning, let’s examine three things that Jesus *did* say in v 20. First, you must have faith *like* a mustard seed. Second, you will say to *this* mountain. Third, “Move from here to there.”

YOU MUST HAVE FAITH LIKE A MUSTARD SEED

Jesus said you must have faith like a mustard seed. What is this faith like a mustard seed that Jesus was talking about? It’s a vision of God’s kingdom come. Jesus previously shared this vision with his disciples in the parable of the mustard seed:

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. Though it is small among seeds, when it has grown it is larger than the vegetables and it becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.” (Matthew 13:31-32)

With that parable and many others, Jesus repeatedly emphasized that God’s coming kingdom would be all-encompassing. In Jesus’ parable, the birds of the air coming to nest in the tree’s

branches is a vision of the future ingathering of the nations before his throne. At the beginning of Matthew's story, Magi from the East came to worship Jesus, and they brought him tribute. The Old Testament prophets foretold that eventually all will do the same. All kings and presidents and prime ministers, all bosses and commanders and landlords—all peoples of all nations will come and pay tribute to Jesus, seeking his justice and peace. Every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess him as Lord, forever and ever. Thus, with regard to the size of God's coming kingdom, Jesus simply reiterated what the prophets had foretold: it will be huge!

Yet God's kingdom didn't begin huge. Jesus repeatedly emphasized the humble beginnings of God's coming kingdom. It was starting small, like a mustard seed, with Jesus alone. He was the sower, who went out scattering seeds. Not all would receive his word of the kingdom, but those who did receive it and believe it would grow organically and bear fruit, 30, 60 or even 100-fold. In this way, Jesus said, God's coming kingdom would begin small but eventually encompass the whole earth.

So, in Matthew 17:20, when Jesus spoke of faith *like* a mustard seed, he wasn't making a size comparison. It's not as if the mustard seed was the smallest acceptable unit for faith, and Jesus was displeased with the disciples's subatomic faith. Jesus wasn't talking about size. Rather, he was talking about a *kind* of faith, namely a visionary faith that is "the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things unseen" (Hebrews 11:1). It's a kind of faith that says, "Even though I don't see God's consummated kingdom in all its glory, I do see Jesus the King. I see in Jesus the kernel of what will someday unfold into the fullness of God's kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven."

In Matthew's story thus far, there have been five occasions when Jesus commended people for their faith. What they all have in common is faith of a certain kind rather than size.

The first of these occurred in Matthew 8:5-13. A Roman Centurion approached Jesus, seeking the healing of his servant. The Centurion understood the nature of authority: he was both an officer in command of others, and also under the authority of his commander. With this in mind, he approached Jesus and said, "Lord, I'm not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word and my servant will be healed." To this Jesus replied, "Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such *faith*." It wasn't the size of the Centurion's faith that caught Jesus' attention; rather, it was the *kind* of faith. The Centurion had recognized in Jesus an even higher authority than Rome. Like the Magi who put their hopes in Jesus rather than King Herod, the Centurion saw in Jesus—rather than Caesar—the seed of God's unfolding kingdom. He honored Jesus as Lord, and Jesus commended him for his faith.

The healing stories in Matthew 9 include three instances when Jesus commended people for their faith. There were the men who brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus. When Jesus saw their faith, he forgave the man's sins and healed him (9:2). There was the bleeding woman, sick for twelve years, who touched the hem of Jesus' garment. Jesus responded, "Your faith has made you well" (9:22). Then there were two blind men who hailed Jesus as the Messiah king, and Jesus restored them "according to their faith" (9:29). All these people saw in Jesus the dawn of God's unfolding kingdom.

The last such instance occurred in Matthew 15:28, while Jesus was in the region of Tyre and Sidon (modern day Lebanon). There he met a Gentile woman whose daughter was demon-possessed. Her gods and leaders were of no help to her, so she hailed Jesus as king. Jesus in turn commended her for her faith and healed her daughter.

In each of these five stories, Jesus commends people for their faith—not of a certain size beyond some minimum threshold, but instead of a certain kind, namely a visionary faith that is centered in Jesus the Messiah King. In a way, the believers in each of these stories saw Jesus by faith as he later was revealed to Peter, James and John on the mountain of transfiguration. Up on the mountain, the disciples saw Jesus as we will some day see him, for “Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again.” We live between the first and second advents, and so we walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). When Jesus returns our faith will become sight, and we will see him as the disciples saw him in the transfiguration. Up on the mountain, Jesus' face shone like the sun, his clothes became as white as light, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and God said, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him!” Down below, Jesus must have looked like any other Galilean peasant, wearing simple clothes, perhaps sweaty and dusty, with nothing to distinguish him from other men. Yet the Roman Centurion, and the friends of the paralytic, and the bleeding woman, and the blind men, and the Canaanite woman, all perceived Jesus differently, in spite of appearances. By faith, the people in these five stories “saw” Jesus' true identity and what was yet to come through him. They entrusted themselves to Jesus as the vanguard of the kingdom come. In response, he commended them for their faith.

In contrast to these five instances of mustard seed faith, we can also look back at Matthew's story and see five instances when Jesus warned people about having “little faith.” Each of these occurred when Jesus was speaking with his disciples.

Matt 6:30. In the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus talked about trusting God for money, he asked his disciples, “If God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of *little faith*?”

Matt 8:26. In the boat, when the disciples feared for their lives during a great storm, Jesus said to them, “Why are you afraid, O you of *little faith*?” Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and there was a great calm.

Matt 14:31. Again, on the Sea, when Jesus rescued Peter from drowning, he took him by the hand and asked, “O you of *little faith*, why did you doubt?”

Matt 16:8. After the feeding of the 5,000, and the feeding of the 4,000, when the disciples then became concerned about not having enough to eat, Jesus asked, “O you of *little faith*, why are you arguing about not having enough bread?”

Matt 17:14-20. After all that the disciples had heard and seen in their journeys with Jesus, and after Peter's rock-solid confession of Jesus as the Messiah King, they still were confused when they were

unable to perform a miracle on their own apart from Jesus. When Jesus arrived and did what they could not do, they asked him, v 19, "why couldn't we cast it out?" To which he replied (v 20), "Because of your *little faith*."

What these five stories have in common is that the disciples were walking by sight rather than faith like a mustard seed. Despite all that they had experienced with Jesus, the disciples still didn't see Jesus as the promised Messiah king.

There's a common misconception today that our prayers go unanswered because we have an inadequate amount of faith, and it frequently is the cause of great heartache. Here's how it often plays out: a loved one lays dying, so you pray for healing, but with no apparent effect. So you share your prayer request with others, calling on them to pray with you. Then a well-intentioned religious friend responds with a clear diagnosis of the problem. It's you. You don't have enough faith, perhaps even saying, "if only you had faith as small as a mustard seed, your loved one would be well." So you pray all the harder, straining and shouting, maybe trying some faith-healer formulas like "binding the enemy" and "laying claim" to your healing, all in an effort to muster enough faith to get a positive reading on the faith-o-meter. It's like the rigged strength tester at the county fair, where no matter how many times you pay for a go with the hammer, you're never able to ring the bell. You're not strong enough. You don't have enough faith. Sadly, if your loved one dies, then you're to blame.

Do you see what's wrong with this approach? Somehow the object of faith has shifted from King Jesus to you. Whenever that happens, it doesn't matter how much faith you have, because you're putting your faith in the wrong person. Mustard seed faith, on the other hand, is all about Jesus. It's the conviction that *he* is enough. If you have faith like a mustard seed, then you'll look to Jesus and see in him and through him a vision of the kingdom come.

Each week when we pray the Lord's Prayer together, we practice this vision with mustard seed faith. We say to our heavenly Father, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." That's our common vision. Can you imagine what that will look like, when Jesus' kingdom is fully revealed in our workplaces and schools, our relationships, our government, the media, the internet, etc.? In imagining the kingdom come, mustard seed faith grows within us.

YOU WILL SAY TO *THIS* MOUNTAIN

Didn't Jesus say that having faith like a mustard seed enables us to "move mountains"? No, he didn't. Look again at v. 20.

For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a (grain of) mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you."

Let's explore what Jesus meant by *this* mountain. When it comes to identifying the Mount of Transfiguration, there are two primary candidates. Mt. Hermon is one option. Six days prior to the transfiguration, Peter had confessed Jesus as King on the road to Caesarea Philippi

(modern-day Golan Heights). Caesarea Philippi sits at the foot of Mt. Hermon, which at over 9,000 feet is the tallest mountain in all of Syria, Lebanon and Israel. On the other hand, Holy Land tour guides prefer the 2,000 foot high Mt. Tabor. It's a safer alternative in central Israel, far from any military conflict with Lebanon or Syria. So which one was it? Matthew doesn't say, and I think he intentionally left this blank. All we are told is what happened on *this* mountain, so the events of the transfiguration must be what's important for us. *This* mountain must represent the heavenly vision of King Jesus when he comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom has no end. With mustard seed faith, we can move *this* mountain, where Jesus' glory was first revealed, and where God spoke to his people from heaven.

It's important to remember that the Mount of Transfiguration is not the first mountain where God gave his people a common vision. In the Exodus story, Moses led the people to Mt. Sinai, and on *that* mountain God spoke to them. In giving them his law and instructions for the tabernacle, God provided them with a common vision for life and worship together as God's holy people. All of what Moses heard and saw atop Mt. Sinai became a blueprint for life together afterwards. You could say that their task, from that point forward, was to move *that* mountain (Sinai) from Arabia to Canaan. By moving *that* mountain, Moses' heavenly vision of God's kingdom would become reality on earth as it is in heaven.

Matthew told Jesus' transfiguration story in a way that would remind his readers of what happened on Mt. Sinai:

17:1. After 6 days Jesus and the disciples went up the mountain and God spoke to them from the cloud. The same thing happened when after 6 days Moses ascended Mt. Sinai and God spoke to him.

17:2. While on the mountain, Jesus' face became radiant, and his clothes began to shine like the sun, just as Moses radiated God's glory from Mt. Sinai.

17:3. Also while on the mountain, who did Jesus and the disciples encounter? Two witnesses representing the Law and the Prophets, Moses and Elijah. They are also the only two characters in the Bible who ascended Mt. Sinai and who heard God's voice in the clouds.

And 17:17. After coming down the mountain, Jesus found his people faltering in their faith, just as Moses came down Mt. Sinai to find his people turning back to idolatry.

God brought Israel out of Egypt in one night at the Red Sea, but then it took forty years in the wilderness to "get Egypt out of Israel." Up on *that* mountain, Moses had receive the vision of the mustard tree, with the birds nesting in the branches. Down below, all Moses had was the seed of God's word. So the Israelites began a long journey, walking by faith and not by sight, to make the glorious mountaintop vision a reality in their lives, and to move *that* mountain to the promised land.

In the same way, on the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter, James and John caught a glimpse of the kingdom come, and they loved it. In fact, Peter wanted to build tents and stay there. But God had something different for them. He said (v 5), "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." Then it was over. They were by themselves once again, with Jesus in his street clothes. It was time to go, and to take this heavenly vision of King Jesus in glory back down to earth. Time to walk by faith and not by sight, and to move *this* mountain... where?

MOVE FROM HERE TO THERE

Jesus said to them, "If you have faith like 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." (Matthew 17:20)

This mountain was the glorious vision of King Jesus when he comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom has no end. What does it mean for us to move it from here to there?

Two mountains remain in Matthew's story. With mustard seed faith, we can move the vision of Jesus in glory from here to there.

The next mountain in the story is Mt. Calvary, the place of sacrifice in Jerusalem. As they descended the Mount of Transfiguration together, Jesus commanded the others, saying, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead" (Matthew 17:9). Then, after healing the boy at the bottom of the mountain, Jesus foretold his passion a second time, saying, "The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day." Jesus had set his face to go to Jerusalem for another transfiguration.

On Mt. Calvary, instead of being transfigured into dazzling white, Jesus' body would be mercilessly scourged and then nailed to a cross. Instead of brightness, there would be darkness. Instead of heroes on either side, there would be criminals. Instead of the adoration of Peter, James and John, there would be three denials. This second transfiguration would be the antithesis of the first. Yet just as it's possible to work out the true photograph by carefully examining its negative image on film, Mt. Calvary has enough similarities to the Mount of Transfiguration that it's possible to see the resemblance. There's Jesus lifted up, with two men on either side, and a cloud overshadowing the whole thing, and an authoritative voice—of the Centurion—proclaiming, "Truly this was the Son of God!"

Can you move this mountain? Can you move the Mount of Transfiguration to Mount Calvary? Can you see Jesus lifted up on the cross, dying for our sins, and nevertheless recognize him as king? You can with mustard seed faith, i.e. beholding Jesus as the seed of God's glorious kingdom. Through Jesus' death, our debts are paid. Through his death, the captives are set free. Through his death, we are reconciled to God and with one another. Through his

transfiguration from glory to shame, our shame is turned to glory. If you can see this, then you have faith like a mustard seed, faith sufficient to move *this* mountain, from the Mount of Transfiguration, to Mount Calvary, and into your heart.

The Apostle Paul said that the crucifixion of Jesus was a stumbling block for Jews and foolishness for Gentiles, but for those who believe it is both the power and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:23-24). One would have expected the early Christians to be ashamed of Jesus' death on a cross, but they weren't. In fact, they boasted in it, because for them it was the beginning of the transfiguration of the entire world. For the early church, the cross wasn't a symbol of defeat but of victory! In his death, King Jesus had defeated death. In his burial, King Jesus became the seed of God's heavenly kingdom planted in the earth. And in his resurrection, King Jesus became the firstfruits of the kingdom come.

Before he ascended to the throne, Jesus went to one more mountain. In Matthew 28, King Jesus commissioned his disciples on a mountain in Galilee. Once again, Matthew could have told his readers which one, but he leaves it blank for our sake. Now, by faith, we can move *this* mountain again, from here at the Mount of Transfiguration, to here at Mount Calvary, to there at the Mount of the Great Commission, the gateway to the ends of the earth.

When the disciples saw Jesus on *this* mountain, not the Mount of Transfiguration or Mount Calvary, but there, somewhere in Galilee, they worshiped him. Then Jesus commissioned them:

“All authority in heaven—and on earth!—has been given to me. Now, therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20)

Someday, at the end of the age, King Jesus will return in glory as he appeared in the Transfiguration. On that day, every knee shall bow before him, in heaven and on earth. Until then, he is with us always with us—not by sight, but by mustard seed faith. The nations need him, but do not know him. Our mission is to move *this* mountain to them, sharing with them our common vision of King Jesus in glory and God's kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.