

LIVING LARGER

Matthew 17:14-20

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So, how have the first two weeks of 2021 gone for you? In my opinion, 2021 has proven more than any other year that the problems of the old year don't magically vanish at 12am New Year's Day. Nope, they're still here, and some problems have only become bigger and more complicated. Unfortunately, there's no return policy on a new year, but our faith can help us view and even overcome challenges we face. That's one of the big things we will talk about today.

Before I get rolling on this message today, I want to take a moment to acknowledge the hard work of our tech and worship teams. Our live stream wouldn't be the good quality that it is without your dedication, extra time in meetings, setup, rehearsals, research... thank you. I'm thankful you're here. Also, I want to thank our hospitality team members: greeters, ushers, and safety team people. From the time we opened to in-person services about half of you've been here nearly every Sunday, and the rest of you joyfully jumped in when called upon, and are incredibly faithful. Thank you so much.

This story from Matthew 17 is an inspiring story that I hope you'll agree gives a great backdrop for the start of a new year. One of the things I like to do when I'm studying the Bible is picture myself in the story. In Matthew's version of the story, we have Jesus, His disciples, the crowd, a boy who was demon-possessed, and the boy's dad. The story is retold in the Gospels of Mark and Luke, and there we have a little more information. So we add to the scene the scribes - low-level leaders from the Temple whose job it was to teach the people Moses' law and make sure they were obeying it.

Jesus, along with Peter, James, and John, had gone on an overnight camping trip up to the top of Mt Tabor.¹ There, Peter, James and John witnessed a wondrous thing called Christ's Transfiguration. The glory of God was made manifest on the top of that mountain, Jesus began to glow and His old clothes even started to gleam in glory, and then two others appeared as if from heaven, and Peter, James and John realized that they were Moses and Elijah. Of course Peter opened his mouth with a plan to build shrines to all involved and then God spoke and rebuked Him and then... there was silence. It was morning. They came down off the mountain to greet the chaos below.

Meanwhile, the other nine disciples were up to their eyeballs in problems. Since one of them was Andrew, let me just pretend to be him for a while...

"Stay here in this little town," they said. "It will be fine," they said. "Keep a low profile and don't tell anyone you're with us," they said. "Oh," I said, "Like that group of people over there?" And so the trouble began, before Judas could even check us into the motel. Jesus and the boys barely got out of there before people started peppering us with questions, hoping to get more info from us than they normally got from our mysterious Rabbi. Too bad for them Peter didn't stay! He'll say anything!

After a short night's sleep we were back to meet the people from the day before. Warm sunshine streamed on the open market in the middle of the village where most of the crowd was already waiting for us. It seems that they brought all their friends, too. Not only were they there, but some of the scribes from the Temple showed up. No pressure, of course. The people were doing a good enough job asking questions, so these scribes held back.

Then a boy ran up to us. He couldn't speak a word, but we could tell he was terrified. And he kept running into things, like it was on purpose. Some of the things he ran into, like a couple of walls, had to hurt him. There were big burn

¹ Or it could have been Mt Hermon, but I'm sticking with Mt Tabor and if you're scratching your head wondering what I'm talking about it's okay. Those are the names of two significant mountains in Israel. Mt Hermon is way up in the North country, which is why I'm sticking with Mt Tabor for this particular story.

marks on his body and he was a complete mess. He looked like he was 10 or 11, and we looked around like, “Where is this boy’s father?” Then we heard a man yelling about his son. The boy’s father. He said he was sure we could heal him. He said he’s tried everything to get this boy well. But since we were followers of Jesus from Nazareth, we could heal his boy. He’d seen both Jesus and some of us perform miracles before, he said.

We looked around at the crowd, but they all stared us down. The scribes crossed their arms and began stroking their beards. Jesus wasn’t there and ... well ... I didn’t feel like I could heal this boy, not on my own. Some of us tried, and the others just kind of held back. The boy started throwing himself down on the ground. He looked terrified and out of control. He would have thrown himself into a fire had he not been stopped... it took four big men to stop this boy who looked like he weighed about sixty pounds, he was so skinny.

“Don’t you follow that teacher from Nazareth?” the oldest scribe sneered at us, “why can’t you heal this boy?”

“Yes,” one of the younger scribes spoke, “isn’t the Law clear about what to do to with false prophets?”

Whoa! That escalated quickly! “False prophets?” Matthew asked, “How are we false prophets?”

“Didn’t you come parading through here about a year ago, healing the sick, casting out demons, preaching the Kingdom of Heaven is here?” the oldest scribe asked. The temperature was rising faster than the sun. The scribes were encouraging the people to be angrier, and meanwhile six of us now were sitting on the boy holding him down as best we could. “Why can’t you heal *now*, why only *then*?” the scribe snarled. “Is *this* more real than *that* was?”

At that moment, we heard more people shouting from around the corner. Peter, James, John, and Jesus had just arrived in the town and were receiving a warm welcome. As they turned the corner, you could see them walking up, smiling, enjoying themselves and acting like they didn’t have a care in the world.

The Dad ran to Jesus and knelt before Him, calling Him his Lord. He asked Jesus for his son’s healing, explaining that we tried, but couldn’t.

Jesus looked around at the now silent crowd. A look of deep pain came into His eyes, like disappointment and disgust combined. He looked around at all of us: “What a generation! No sense of God! No focus to your lives! How many times do I have to go over these things? How much longer...” Then He said, “Bring the boy to me.” So, half dragging and half being dragged by this boy we took Him to Jesus.

All of a sudden this boy who was trapped in a noiseless body began to scream loudly in a voice that made me want to run away! And Jesus began looking at the boy and rebuking him by name. “That’s not his name,” I heard his Dad mutter. And then it occurred to us that Jesus was rebuking someone else inside the boy, ordering him to leave the boy alone. Suddenly the boy convulsed and became brittle and fell limply to the ground. Jesus picked him up, and smiling, handed him back to the boy’s Dad. The boy was healed.

The scribes scowled at us, and their eyes flashed with pure hatred when they looked at Jesus. But they left. The crowd went back to their market work or went home. It seemed that they were a little disappointed that things turned out so well for everyone.

We see faith - or lack thereof - in three of the four main groups of the story: the crowd including the Scribes, the disciples, and the boy and his Dad. **[SLIDE: A DAD’S FAITH]** We see a Dad’s faith on display.

1. The Dad **brought his child** to people associated with Jesus. He knew that caring for his child was beyond his scope of ability and he needed help and support. Instead of going to the astrologer, or a self-help scroll, he came to Jesus. We need more Dads like him today who are willing to bring their children to Jesus.

2. Here's the thing, though, and I know this is going to blow your mind: humans are not a substitute for Jesus. **When Jesus' disciples failed, Dad waited for Jesus.** Of course, many times humans begin to depend on other humans to do their spiritual work for them. And sometimes the humans that do the spiritual work get into a bad place themselves, or they become proud - or a combination - and then their followers become disheartened and disillusioned. Human leaders will show their true human colors from time to time, which is why you have to keep your eyes on Jesus. Dad recognized the Source of the disciples' power and believed that even though the disciples failed, Jesus would not fail.
3. We see faith in the Dad in his approach to Jesus. **When he approached, he knelt before Jesus.** He called Jesus, "Lord." His first action in front of Jesus was to worship. Men, especially men... did you know that when we gather together as Christian people, that Jesus is also with us? Men, this Dad knelt before Jesus and worshiped Him. He didn't have to do that, but he did. We need Christians, and especially Christian men who aren't ashamed to worship Christ. We need Christians who aren't afraid to worship Him and call Jesus, "Lord," even when they're surrounded by a crowd that includes ambivalent and hostile people. When Dad knelt before Jesus, he stood against the crowd. And Jesus healed his son.

[SLIDE: THE DISCIPLES' FAITH]

When no one else was around, the nine disciples approached Jesus and asked why they couldn't heal the boy.

1. **Apparently, the disciples' faith was very limited.** Jesus said that they couldn't heal the boy because "you have little faith." This may have referred to size, but it also likely referred to the quality of their faith, and what or whom they were trusting in at the moment. Jesus was likely disappointed that they did not fully trust in the authority that Jesus had given them a year ago. They could have confidently cast the demon out of the boy if:
(1) they prayed, trusting in the power of God; (2) they recognized that Jesus gave them authority over these things; (3) they stayed focused and confident against the naysayers; and (4) they themselves remained united in faith.
 - a. As I researched this, I noticed that when Jesus said, "because of your little faith" - "little" and "faith" are connected in the Greek in one compound word. But "your" is not only a possessive word pointing to faith, but it also has to do with your receptors. You know what receptors are; they are the parts of your body that process external signals through our senses that God has given us: our sense of smell through our nose; our sense of taste through our tongue; our sense of touch everywhere; our sense of sight through our eyes, and especially here, our sense of hearing through our ears.
 - b. The disciples' faith receptors either didn't work very well or they had limited capacity. Either they couldn't hear faith-strengthening messages or they couldn't take that much.
 - c. Romans 10:17 says, "Faith comes by hearing." And not just hearing anything. "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God." We can pollute our faith receptors and our minds and our hearts with competing messages. Manifestation is quickly taking the place of prayer among many spiritual people, including people who would identify as Christian. Many will say it doesn't matter in whom or in what you believe as long as you are sincere in your beliefs and guided by love.

Maybe it was this pollution of faith-receptors that was so frustrating to Jesus. As He turned to look around, He saw people who sincerely believed half-truths all the way to people who fiercely rejected God's plan. **Jesus called them and the rest of the crowd faithless and twisted**, or unbelieving and corrupt, or perverted. Wow! Do you wonder what He might say to us, today?

We get ourselves mixed up in so many things, following after the teachings of people who claim to have a version of spirituality that can reveal secret wisdom or solve any relationship or financial problem you can think of. Like the

charlatan magicians of Pharaoh before Moses, leaders of the manifestation movement - and others - claim to work their own miracles. But, friends, if they deny that Jesus Christ is God, and that He came in the flesh, died on the cross for our sins (including theirs) and rose from the grave then they do not share in the Gospel nor in the true power of God, and the Scriptures instruct us that such people are not spiritual children of God even though they may claim to be. I have heard many say that the power of Christians is limited and that Christianity is far too narrow. True enough, Jesus, our Savior, said that the way that leads to life is narrow and only a few people find it, but that the highway to destruction is popular and well-traveled. The object of our faith is the One true and living Almighty God: the God who has all power to love, to reconcile, to bring back from the dead!

This living Almighty God is revealed to us in the resurrected Savior Jesus Christ who invites us to believe. When we believe in Him, this living God, this resurrected Savior then we are given the Holy Spirit to live within us, filling us with the love, strength, and life-giving power of God! Because of the power of God we can say to mountains in our lives, "Move!" and they will move.

[Slide: What could have limited the disciples' faith?]

But we can limit God's power in us through our lack of faith in Him. If faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God, then I need to ask myself a serious question: what place does the Word of God have in my life? How am I increasing the effectiveness of my faith-receptors, and how am I giving the Word of God more space in my life?

[Slide: What could be limiting your faith?]

Throughout 2020, God has been speaking to me about my life. I hope you have heard Him speaking to you about yours, too. As a result I've been asking questions of myself... questions like, how big *is* He, anyway? Can He really take care of issues I face? And what's the size limit or scope of the issues He can handle?

So, I want to invite you to ask yourself a couple questions I've been asking myself:

2. Name a hopeless situation in your life. What do you believe about it? What do you believe about God in relationship to that hopeless situation?

In 2021, am I going to take some risks in order to live larger for Him, or am I going to shrink back into my comfy cocoon of good intentions and dysfunction?

[Slide: **How will you be living larger in order to see your faith increase?**]

I haven't set a lot of goals for 2021... I'm still working on goals from 2015, thanks. :) But ... I have made a commitment to myself and God that I'm going to find ways to live larger, to grow my faith, take more risks, trust that God will lead me, and that He can take care of me. What can I do faster, more selflessly, kinder, and with more energy, intensity, and compassion?

We have the promise of Jesus, that if we have faith the size of a tiny mustard seed, nothing will be impossible to us. Together, let's live larger for the Kingdom of God. Amen.