

“Faith”

Introduction: This fall we will be exploring the cry we heard last week in Psalm 80: *Restore us, O God*. Identified in that psalm with the metaphor of a “vine,” we saw that this people who made this cry needed revival and renewal. Like our old altar plants, they needed pruning, the pruning of repentance, and they needed nourishment, the light of the Son and living water of the Spirit. And in the midst of all that, they needed the companionship of one another.

Where might the cry for restoration be your cry? Where are you, where is our church, in need of restoration? What would that look like? How might that happen?

We’ll begin this journey by looking over the next three weeks at what are known as the theological virtues – faith, hope, and love. They are dubbed theological in that they come from God. They are named virtues in that they highlight habits if, developed over a lifetime, give us a way of being that enables us to flourish as citizens of the kingdom of God.

Faith simply defined is wholehearted trust and dependence upon God. It’s not the amount but the object that is important. We’ll learn about it from those who were struggling with it – both the disciples of Jesus as well as the father of a sick young boy.

I. Failure in the midst of the fray

A. Just prior to the action described in this text, Jesus had taken three of his disciples—Peter, James, and John—on a bit of a hiking trip. They went up a high mountain (v. 2), where they were joined on the summit by Moses and Elijah. There Jesus was transfigured—“his clothing became dazzling white, whiter than anyone could bleach them” (v. 3). It was an overwhelming and unmistakable revelation of the identity of Jesus – greater than the lawgiver Moses, greater than the prophet Elijah, and none other than the divine Son of God in all of his royal glory.

B. Perhaps some of this glory was still lingering when Jesus arrived back down at the foot of the mountain, and so why the people who saw him were overwhelmed with wonder. Mark doesn’t tell us for certain. What he does note is that when Jesus and the three disciples rejoined the others in the midst of the fray, they found their friends and the religious leaders engaged in a heated argument. No more dazzling, mountain top experience; it was back to the reality of real life!

C. We’re not exactly sure what the argument was about but it likely had to do with the disciples’ failure to heal the young boy that a father had brought to them. The father jumps in to bring Jesus up to date. An evil spirit had been plaguing this boy since childhood, he explained. The symptoms he describes indicate epilepsy, but that there was also a force at work that was throwing the poor boy into fire or water in order to kill him. It reveals the presence of the spiritual force of evil that was seeking to do what evil does: distort and destroy the image of God. The dad had been looking for Jesus but when he couldn’t find him, figured his disciples ought to be able to do something helpful. Perhaps he had heard (or seen) that Jesus had recently sent these guys out on a mission, and that they had been very successful.

Here's how Mark describes it:

Calling the Twelve to him, [Jesus] began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits. . . They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them (Mk. 6:7-12).

II. The focus of our faith

A. But this time (and I would imagine that it came as a huge surprise to them), they could do nothing. When the father, probably relieved that Jesus is now back on the scene, pleads with Jesus to do something, "if he can," Jesus turns the tables on him. It becomes not about the power or ability of Jesus but about the faith.

B. As for the father, he wasn't sure what was possible. But he was honest about it, and he was sure about Jesus, sure that if anything could be done, Jesus was the one to do it. And so he uttered a most human and humble cry: "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief." He took what faith he had and tied himself to Jesus like he would an anchor. And that was enough for Jesus. It wasn't the amount of faith that this man had; it was the focus of his faith.

C. As for the disciples, vv. 28-29 provide us with a kind of epilogue:

After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer."

After all was said and done, after Jesus brought this boy back to life, the disciples remained puzzled. At least they wanted to learn from their failure. Let me notice two things I hoped they learned, and what I think the text encourages us to learn.

1. The first is that what Jesus had to teach them about faith was linked to prayer. My hunch is that they had become so enamored by their past success that they figured nothing could stop 'em. But as it can happen, when ministry is successful, dependence on God can shrink. We can start to think that it's all about us. And a sure sign that we have begun to operate under our own steam is when prayer becomes neglected. For faith to be restored, for faith to be effective, it must be a faith that prays, a faith that, through prayer, rests in and is dependent upon, God.

What are we confident we can do ourselves? Whatever it is we don't pray about! What do we pray about? Whatever we recognize we cannot do ourselves! "Without me," Jesus the vine says to us the branches, "you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5). As Henri Nouwen puts it, prayer "is a way of being empty and useless in the presence of God and so of proclaiming our basic belief that all is grace and nothing is simply the result of hard work."

Prayer, therefore, must permeate our life of faith, not just a quick prayer when a need arises, but a life of prayer, grounded in and primed by the reading of God's word, that seeks a deepening relationship with God. Time spent in the psalms is very helpful here.

2. The second learning that I hope the church comes away with goes back to the argument the disciples were having with the religious leaders. Notice how, while the disciples were arguing, they were not only not praying, but they were not caring for the needs of a very distraught father. While this man stood by, agonizing over the suffering of his child, they were wrangling with their opponents. That can be a state of affairs that needs restoration. Churches, it seems, can spend more time arguing over theological issues, or suspected heresies, or ways of doing church, or even just music, than caring for those with needs. While we debate who is right, who is wrong, who is at fault, the world stands by helplessly in the grip of evil. Often, people end up turning away from God and the church because they become turned off by our bickering, with each other, or with the secular world.

For faith to be restored, linking it with prayer and putting arguing aside and focusing on care would be two very helpful ways to begin.

D. In Matthew's account of this episode, he includes this closing statement by Jesus: "Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." [Ma. 17:22]

That's a challenging statement! It highlights that what is important as we live a life of faith is not how much we have, but what its focus is. And when our focus is on Jesus, it doesn't mean things will always go the way we want them to, but it does mean that there is no telling what Jesus might do through us, his faithful people.