

WITHOUT THIS THERE IS NOUGHT LUKE 17:5-10 OCTOBER 7, 2001

1. INTRODUCTION

There is this curious story being reported in the Post about an employee at the Pentagon who escaped the damaged part of the building through blinding smoke and fire. He has just been released from the hospital for treatment of his burns. When the plane crashed, he and his colleagues were blown from their desks and all was confusion. Then he and some of his co-workers heard a voice in the chaos. “Just follow my voice. Come toward my voice”. As the person kept talking the survivors made their way toward the voice and out of the building, injured but alive. The man did not know whose voice it was he was following until Wednesday of this week, when he met the man, a Pentagon police officer in the bomb sniffing canine unit. The two have spoken on the phone. It is a compelling story, and for both men a life altering story. It is a story of what can take place in the midst of chaos and despair, the appearance of something that can lead us to safety.

11. SORTING OUT THE TEXT.

The audience for this text is called, within a few verses of this chapter, disciples and apostles. I thought there might be something significant in this change of terms within a few verses, but from the reading I did, it seems Luke used the two terms interchangeably for those whom Jesus called to him. The apostles plead to Jesus, “Increase our faith.” They do so in response to some severe remarks of Jesus about the nature of the relationship of Jesus followers to each other, the duty and responsibility they owe to each other. These verses are left out of our text.

In response to the request, Jesus says to his disciples, “If you had the faith of a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this sycamine tree, Be rooted up, and be planted by the sea, and it would obey you.”

I tracked the appearance of this teaching in other places in the gospels. In Matthew 17:20 there is a story of a man whose son is an epileptic whom he brought to the disciples, after they were commissioned and sent out by Jesus, but they could do nothing. Jesus chastises them as a faithless generation. Jesus heals the son, and calls his disciples to him and says, “If you have the faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, Move hence to yonder place, and it will move...” Then in Matthew 21:21, in a text in which Jesus has cursed the fig tree that had no fruit for him to eat, and the disciples wonder at it, Jesus says; “Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and never doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, Be taken up and cast into the sea, it will be done.” Then in Mark the context for the teaching is the cursing of the fig tree, and Jesus says, “Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, Be taken up and cast into the sea, and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him.”

You can see how things work in the collection and recording of the tradition about Jesus. In Matthew and Luke, the image of the grain of mustard seed is used as an expression for faith. In Matthew, it is a mountain that is moved, in Luke it is a sycamine tree. In the second passage from Matthew and Mark there is no mention of the mustard seed, and they both refer to the mountain being moved into the sea. In one passage in Matthew, there is a reference to the mustard seed, in the other there is not. Mustard seed is mentioned in one Matthew passage, and in the Luke passage. In the second Matthew passage and in Mark, there is no mention of the seed, and both refer to the moving of a mountain. When we look at this review of the texts, we can see that there was obviously a tradition about Jesus teaching of the power of faith and in all the cases I think we can safely say that Jesus uses hyperbole. Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary defines hyperbole as "...obvious and intentional exaggeration, an extravagant statement or figure of speech not intended to be taken literally." There are a few small points that emphasize the exaggeration. The tree named in the text is a tree with an especially deep and extensive root system. Mountains have a vivid place in the ancient religious imagination. The center of the world was seen by many ancient peoples as a mountain. Yahweh has his home on a mountain and Moses ascended the mountain to be in the presence of God and to receive the tablets with the laws of the covenant upon them.

What's going on here? We first need to note that Jesus never did deeds anything like what he uses to illustrate a point. He never moved mountains. He was, in fact, crucified on a hill. He never uprooted a tree and made it move. He did curse the fig tree. But he was crucified on a tree. I do not think he suggested to anyone that they should seek to move a mountain or that they should seek to move a tree. But at the same time, the short sayings of a few words have an enormous power. In Jim Crace's novel The Gift of Stone's, about a boy who lives in an ancient village which quarried flint and made ancient household and battle implements from the stone, who loses his arm. There is not much for a one armed boy to do in a village that makes its way in the world by working stone. So he ends up going out into the world and coming back telling stories, some true some lies, about what goes on in the outside world. At one point Crace writes about this boy grown to be a man and a story teller, "Salute the liars—they can make the real world disappear and a fresh world take its place."

11. WE ARE TALKING ABOUT FAITH.

When Jesus comments on faith or invites people to have faith, there has been a debate about what it is exactly that he means. I did some reading on the question. There are some, especially in Germany, who suggest that when Jesus makes these comments that he is inviting people to have the same faith as he has. What is clear from the research, and, what we will come to later, our own experience in the midst of life, is that Jesus is not inviting people to what the church offers to people as faith. Jesus is not talking about becoming part of a religious community. He was not talking about believing certain dogmas, or certain propositions. He was not inviting people to believe what we ask people to believe, that Jesus Christ is the son of God and our Savior. Norman Perrin and Edward Schillebeeckx explore this issue. They agree on what they find. Often when Jesus refers to faith, he does so in the context of a healing or an exorcism. People often came to

Jesus in desperation with conditions that seem to be hopeless. They come to Jesus and they bring to him their despair and their hopelessness and entrust themselves not so much to Jesus, but to what they see or have heard is at work in Jesus. When they receive what they want, release from a disease, release from the grip of a demon which controls their lives, Jesus will say to them, your faith has made you whole, your faith has healed you. Jesus never heals or does an exorcism on demand to prove to doubters that he is who some say he is. As is demonstrated in the synoptic gospels, it is possible to interpret what he does in different ways. On occasion those who see Jesus as threat or enemy, suggest that his healings or his exorcism comes by means of an alliance with the demons. Those who come to him in despair, or in need, see something else at work. It is what they see at work in Jesus and in aligning their lives with that which is what Jesus means by faith.

What the people who come to Jesus see, especially those whose lives are captive to powers or illness, or whose lives are forced to take place on the outside of the good places of life for others, is that God is at work in the path of Jesus and that they decide to give their lives over to that which is at work in Jesus. The voice in the story that I told at the beginning of this sermon may not be the explicit work of God, but what it was for the man who followed it and what the occurrence can signify for us is that there is at work in the world that which provides the power for release of captive lives, that which allows the despairing or grieving to see the great river of good that flows beneath the surface of a world rent by hardship, violence, pointlessness, unfairness, insignificance and meaninglessness. Even for people who find themselves in the midst of lives that are not dramatically afflicted by such things as we have seen others subjected to these last few weeks, can find themselves caught by a cold and dark night that bleeds all normal pleasures of their power. Then, it is possible that there can appear, in the midst of a life in that night, the disclosure of something that can be seen as that power which singularly releases life from coldness and darkness and it becomes possible to entrust ones life to that power.

I want to tell you about something I found out about this last week. In a report on NPR this last week, Bob Edwards talked to an editor of the New York Times. The Times, in an effort not just to report what happened on September 11, but to honor and work their way through to what I, what we, would call the redeeming presence of God in the midst of chaos, began to everyday, print a page of some of the people who died or are still missing in the World Trade Center tragedy. They find family members and talk to them about the person who is gone. They do not do obituaries, reports on birth, age, occupations, survivors that is the normal text of an obituary. Rather they seek to discover what made up the persons life when it was so tragically interrupted. Along with a picture, and a few short paragraphs, the life unfolding in the midst of family, friends, colleagues, vocation, passion is lived once again, if only briefly. And those of us who watched and who has loss can just possibly see beneath the surface of what takes place in the world, the great, river of God's grace to which we can entrust our lives from this day forward. That is faith. It is to be allowed to see the activity of God in a world sometimes seems gone mad, or life held too long in the dark, the surging and movement of that which suggests to us that no matter what, life is good, and we discover that we can entrust ourselves to the

source of that surging and movement, to the God who created, preserved and always redeems this world and the lives in it.

Then we see that what we always strived to gain, that which we wanted to gather into our lives in terms of possessions, or achievements, or honors or mastery, fades from the centrality it has held for us. We do not return to them, though they may be returned to us, but they are returned to us all labeled with what they essentially are; secondary and peripheral matters. For there has been disclosed to us that which is central, and essential and we have given ourselves to it in gladness and joy.

Then there is no hyperbole about what that faith means to us. To move a tree or a mountain is nothing compared to taking up a broken life and continuing to live with joy, laughter, generosity, compassion and hope.

Amen