

Impossible Possibility
Matthew 17:14-20
May 19, 2019
First Presbyterian, Luling

I remember, quite clearly, the first time I disappointed one of our children. Anna was little, probably just two or three years old. She was late at learning to talk, so she didn't have many words to express herself. Instead, she had an incredibly expressive face, and I got to be pretty good at figuring out what she was communicating by the look on her face.

Anything that she needed help doing, I was the person she came to. She wanted to play with the playdough, but she couldn't take the lid off? She would come to me, hold out the playdough, and give me her "please" look and I would pop the lid off. A thousand times a day, I would fix what needed fixing; open what needed opening; cut into bite sized pieces what needed cutting. I suppose as far as Anna was concerned, I could do anything. I hadn't shown her otherwise.

Until one day when we were coloring. She was never particularly interested in coloring. She would much prefer to take the crayons out of their box and put them back in. She spent a looonnggg time in the stage of taking things out of containers and putting them back into containers. That day, she discovered that she could slide the crayons out of their wrappers. Well, that was big fun. Until it wasn't fun at all and she decided, in the way of toddlers, that she wanted to slide the crayons back into their wrappers. Which she couldn't do, but that wasn't too terrible, because she could go to her fall-back, me. She handed me the wrapper and the crayon and gave me her "please" look. I shook my head and told her, "Mama can't put those back in. It's impossible." I handed them back to her. She very patiently, as though I didn't understand what she wanted, handed them back to me and upped her game by adding in a "please" in sign language. "Sweet baby, Mama can't put the colors back in the wrappers. It's impossible." After going back and forth on this several times, she realized that I really couldn't fix it, and her little face acquired a new expression: disappointment in Mama. It was heart-breaking. I told myself she would need to learn that I would disappoint her, that I couldn't fix everything, sooner or later, but I didn't really want it to be sooner.

Though I can't make the impossible into the possible, God is in the habit of doing exactly that. In our Gospel reading, the disciples have failed to help a little boy. He has epilepsy and falls into danger when he has seizures. In the understanding of Jesus' time, they believed that his epilepsy was caused by a

demon. His father pleads with Jesus to help. Jesus grumbles a bit about the whole situation, but then rebukes the demon and the boy is cured. When the disciples ask him about it—why couldn't we do that? We did just what you told us, and it didn't work—Jesus tells them, not very helpfully in my opinion, that it is because they didn't have enough faith. “If you have faith the size of 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.”

That's all it takes? Faith the size of a mustard seed seems pretty manageable for mere humans. Surely we can come up with that tiny amount of faith. I believe that most of us do have faith the size of a mustard seed, at least most of the time. And I believe that it is not up to us alone to create faith, but that even our faith itself is a gift from God. That little mustard seed of faith isn't ours to conjure up, but comes from God.

What I think we lack is imagination. We lack the imagination to think that the mountain is anything but stuck right where it is. It simply doesn't occur to us that a mountain could move. Our faith is small not so much in size but in scope, or in focus. Our faith doesn't dream big enough or wildly enough or impossibly enough.

One of the ordination and installation vows that both Presbyterian ministers and elders take, is the promise to serve God's people with “energy, intelligence, imagination, and love.” It's my favorite of the vows, not because it's easy but because it challenges me. Sometime last fall, our session had a discussion about which of these areas we personally find come to us easily and which are a stretch. What we found is that each of the four of us had a different answer. Together, we can fulfill this vow, because each of us have different gifts, but it would be impossible for us to do so alone. It was yet another reminder that God calls us into ministry together, as a community of faith. Our mustard seed-sized faith needs not only imagination to believe that the mountain can be moved, but the intelligence to figure out how, the energy to make it happen, and the love to sustain us through what seems impossible.

I said earlier that God is in the habit of making the impossible into the possible. Hannah's song, which we read from 1 Samuel, rejoices in the gift of a son, a son whose conception and birth she thought was impossible. She sings of the world being turned upside down, of the poor being lifted to sit with princes, which seemed impossible to her and to us, too. Centuries later, another young woman named Mary would sing a similar song, after the angel Gabriel tells her of the impossible thing God has made possible, that she too would have a baby who

would be called the Son of God. And if God can do *that* impossible thing, then surely God can turn the world upside down, too. The angel reminds Mary, and us, that “nothing is impossible with God.”

I thought that I had come up with an original sermon title, the Impossible Possibility, as I thought about the several times throughout Old and New Testaments where this truth is proclaimed: that with God, all things are possible, that God transforms the impossible into the possible. A little bit of internet research informs me that I'm not at all original, which is not surprising. Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr, both twentieth century theologians, used this same phrase, though in different ways. Niebuhr in particular used it to describe the love God has for the world.¹ That love is not yet realized, completely, and thus impossible. But it is—at the same time--real and present and visible, and therefore possible. The love God has for the world, the intention God has for us, is an impossible possibility and a possible impossibility.

Our faith is similar. The mustard seed size of our faith makes moving the mountain possible. But the limits we put on the imagination of our faith make moving that same mountain impossible.

Here in this congregation we're already doing things in ways that might have seemed impossible only a generation or two ago. Within the memories of some of you, it would have seemed impossible that a woman could be your pastor. And now you've had more than one of us. It would have seemed impossible, at points in our history, that people of different races could worship together. It would have seemed impossible that it would be fine and acceptable and not worthy of even noticing that women could wear pants to church, and men come without a tie. Any or all of those things, and many more, would have been impossible for anyone in these pews to imagine.

When the Session had that conversation about the ordination vow of energy, intelligence, imagination, and love, I'll confess to you that “imagination” was not the thing that came easily to me. My brother-in-law sometimes says that I'm “terminally practical,” which is true, and that has the side effect of me not exercising my imagination much. If my imagination were the size of a mustard seed, what kinds of things could I imagine for this congregation? What kinds of impossible things does God has in mind for us, will God *make* possible for us? Does God have some impossible people to send to us, if only we'll make them welcome? Does God have an impossible idea for us to try out, if only we have the

¹ Morgan, Brandon L. “The Lordship of Christ and the Gathering of the Church: Hauerwas’s Debts to the 1948 Barth-Niebuhr Exchange.” https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/sites/ca.grebel/files/uploads/files/cgr_-_winter_2015_a3.pdf

courage? Does God have some impossible ideas for our budget, if only we have the generosity? God's imagination has no limits. God can turn the world upside down. God's love is the ultimate impossible possibility. What impossible possibility is God imagining for us?

As the Apostle Paul reminds the Corinthians, "If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing." With God, with faith the size of a mustard seed, with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love, all things are possible. Thanks be to God.