



June 12, 2011
Pastor Jeremy Vaccaro
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

Moving Mountains: Mount of Prayer

Matthew 14:13-23

I'm so glad to be a part of a church that embarks on such an audacious dream of reconciliation. I'm so glad that our young adults had the incredible, transforming privilege of participating in such an adventure. It was my delight to participate for just a few days with the Sound & Sand Encounter when the 29 young adult participants were just getting to know each other in a lodge outside of Packwood. Many of you know the story of me sitting at table with a young Palestinian Christian woman as she met, for the very first time, a young Jewish man who loves Jesus as his Messiah. She was so excited because—before hearing about and signing up for the Sound & Sand Encounter—she didn't even know people like him existed. And I got to sit between them as they discovered each other.

Reconciliation between the Messianic Community in Israel and the Palestinian Christian Church is no “small potatoes” task. It seems impossible—I’m sure at times it seemed impossible to the 29 Sound & Sand participants. And, in fact, it is impossible... for us. The only way such a big, hairy, audacious goal could be achieved—even on a small scale—is for Christ to intervene.

This morning we continue looking at the events in Scripture that involve mountains... it just seems that there is something cool and interesting about the mountains of scripture. It makes me glad that Jesus didn't come to Nebraska when He came. We probably would have had a much flatter biblical account.

Today, on an indistinct mountainside near the Sea of Galilee, in Matthew 14, we get a glimpse of something that is so important for us to understand about Jesus, His disciples, and our church. If we don't get it, we will always be frustrated in our efforts toward the mission that God has called us to in Christ.

[Read Matthew 14:13-23]

In verse 12, men were on their way to tell Jesus that John the Baptist, His cousin, had been murdered by Herod. So Jesus withdrew to a deserted place; it seems He just wanted some time alone to process what had happened to his cousin... to mourn, to pray. Have you ever felt like that? (All the introverts know what that feels like, but you extroverts might be saying, “What? Alone?”) But in an almost comical scene, the crowds got wind of Jesus' withdraw, and they would have none of it. So they started running along the shore of the lake to follow Jesus' boat.

Now, I'm not sure about you, but when I'm feeling like I need some alone time I have a hard time being gracious to those who interrupt my precious time. When I'm feeling like I need a really good night's rest and one of my kids comes in during the night after a bad dream, I struggle to do more than just say 'bummer' and roll over to go back to sleep. When there is a game or something on TV that I really want to watch after they go to bed, but right when I get settled on the couch one of them comes downstairs to tell me they're bleeding because they picked a scab, I struggle to do more than yell, 'that's your problem.'

Jesus' cousin had just been murdered by the local authority—something Jesus knew would eventually happen to Him—and He wanted to be alone. But when He finally brought His boat ashore, Matthew writes that Jesus "saw" the large crowd and something stirred in His gut for them, so He began to minister to them.

Pretty soon, the day was almost done; the disciples were getting tired, and they thought it best for the crowd to disperse from this desolate place. So they came to Jesus and told Him what to do (never a good sign), "Send these people away ... just in case you hadn't noticed, we **are** in a pretty remote area here, and it **is** getting pretty late you know. Last I checked there wasn't a Taco Bell anywhere nearby, so don't you think it'd be a good idea to send these people along so they can take care of themselves (sarcastically)?" But, before you judge 'em, don't you think you've been there with Jesus before?

Perhaps you have faced what seems like an insurmountable need or problem. You cross the border into Mexico and you see systemic poverty and corruption. You're there to build a few houses for a few families, so you wonder, "Can we even make a dent?" You're sitting with young adults from Israel and Palestine who have a fundamental disagreement about reality and whose fault it is, even though they have Jesus in common. You're thinking, "How could what we're doing on this hike through the woods possibly matter in the big picture?" You learn that your son or daughter is smoking weed with their friends and their attitude is so rebellious that you have no idea what to do. Your marriage is a complete mess and when your friend encourages you to work it out, you just laugh thinking 'there is no way'. Your denomination—the one that helped you know Christ, that called you to ministry, the one with so many churches whose ministry you admire—when that denomination seems to be moving inexorably in a direction that seems so deeply wrong to you and you feel powerless to change its trajectory. In the midst of such overwhelming need, whatever it is, you come to Jesus saying, "Hellooo, Jesus, can't you see that we have a huge problem here? Don't you even care? Can't you just take care of it? I'm tired of it, and I don't want to even want to think about this anymore. Do something Jesus!"

"They don't need to go away," Jesus replied. "You give them something to eat." "What?! You want **us** to take care of **your** crowd? Well, here's the deal we only have 5 loaves of bread (and we're not talking Costco sized loaves here Jesus) and a few fish (just the little ones that Peter catches)! How could we possibly feed them?"

They were in a desperate situation now. There's no way that the food they had was sufficient to feed all the people—never mind the fact that they didn't even really want to. They couldn't do it on their own; they couldn't do what Jesus asked them to do on their own.

So what did Jesus say? 'Bring what you have to me.' 'Just bring me what you have. Let me do something special with what you offer up to me. Bring to me the gifts that you have, bring to me the skills that you have, bring to me the money that you have, bring to me what little you have to offer and with God's blessing I will multiply for God's Kingdom.'

The disciples were dependent on Jesus to get the job done that Jesus had asked them to do. I think that's important. Jesus said, "You give them something to eat." But still, to be obedient, they had to rely on Jesus. This is such an important lesson for every disciple of Jesus, especially us. Many of us feel proud of the fact that we are pretty competent people. We do our jobs well; we work hard; we have high expectations for ourselves. We are well educated; we are well resourced; we are Americans. We didn't get any hand-outs to get where we are in life; we worked hard and we earned it. There is so much admirable about that, but it has a shadow side too. How often are you aware of your dependence on God? You can't raise your kids to know Jesus without Jesus' help. You can't break that secret addiction; you can't be a witness in your workplace; you can't bring spiritual wholeness to your marriage; you can't do any of these things on your own. Even when we join forces in the church, we can't make our kids love Jesus; we can't save broken families; we can't bring an end to poverty in a rural village in Guatemala; we can't cause reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians; we can't present anyone mature in Christ; we can't even discern what's best to do about our denomination. We can't do any of these things on our own! But we try. Yet somewhere along the way we must realize that no matter how intelligent or strategic or rich or collaborative or motivated we might be, disciples always are dependent on Jesus.

Did you notice, though, the one who modeled best what dependence looks like? It was Jesus. When the disciples brought Jesus the food, to whom did Jesus direct His attention and thanksgiving? God, the Father. Then, when all were well fed the disciples sent away and the crowd dismissed, to whom did Jesus turn upon the mountainside by Himself? He turned to His Heavenly Father. Why? Did He really **need** to spend time praying? Or was He just modeling the behavior so that others would know how to have quiet times and satisfy their need for God? Look back at John 5:19, "*Jesus gave them this answer: "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees the Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does."*" The Son can do most things by Himself? No. The Son can do some things by Himself? No. The Son can do nothing by Himself. Jesus took the bread and fish then looked up to heaven because He was dependent on the Father. Jesus, still struggling with His cousin's death, went up on the mountainside by Himself to pray, because He needed time with His Heavenly

Father. So, if Jesus—God the Son in the flesh—was dependent on God the Father. Then where does that leave us? We are utterly, helplessly, absolutely dependent on Christ.

Now, since we're dependent on Christ does that mean we just sit back and watch the Jesus show? 'Alright Jesus, we can't do it on our own, so take it away, but let me go get some popcorn and a drink first, this is going to be fun.' Is that how it goes down in the text? What actually happened? Jesus took the bread and fish, blessed God for it, and then "*He gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people.*" How cool is that?! Jesus didn't make bread just magically appear in the hands of all the people; fish didn't start suddenly jumping from the lake into their baskets. No, Jesus gave the bread and fish back to the disciples and **the miracle happened while they obeyed Jesus.** You know what's more fun than watching a show? It's being in the show. Jesus allows the disciples to participate in the miracle and in the ministry. It was the food that they had and distributed. Jesus said bring what you have to me. They gave Him what they had; He blessed God for it and gave it back to them. And as they gave it away to the people, God multiplied it for the work of His Kingdom!

Being dependent on Jesus doesn't mean just sitting back and hoping God will do something; it means giving what we have to Jesus and doing what he tells us to do. It means going into the desert with 20+ friends, knowing that the real problem is way bigger than this small group could ever solve, but nevertheless giving themselves fully to the ministry of reconciliation trusting that as they do Jesus will multiply it according to His will. It means rallying around our children as a whole church, giving of our time and our lives to demonstrate to them what it means to follow Christ, depending on Jesus to take our ministry and use it for His will in their lives. It means the members of this church gathering on Wednesday night to give what they have in grappling with the issues of our denomination and the work of discernment while depending totally on Jesus to show us the way. The session is working hard to live that out. We, as a session, are more committed to corporate prayer than we have ever been in my 9 years of ministry with you. Beloved, we, as a church, have more intellectual capital than we know what to do with; we have really strong leadership; we have vibrant mission community; we have incredible savvy. But listen, we can't determine the best path on our own. We've got to depend on Jesus, and we've got to do that together. So, I hope you'll be here on Wednesday night for our Town Hall Meeting.

When was the last time you attempted to do something that you knew you couldn't do without the Lord's help? Can you think of something? What was it? If you can't think of something, that's okay... but maybe it's time to start living into your actual dependence on Jesus. He is sufficient. He is absolutely dependable. He is the One and only Son come from the Father. He is the One who holds all things together. He is the One through whom we have been reconciled to God. He is our salvation. He is the center of worship. He is the mediator of fellowship. He is our Lord.

So may you give everything you have to Him, so that you know the radical joy of dependence on Christ alone.

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Read the passage out loud.**
- **Reflect & Apply Individually:** Each person take 5-7 minutes to circle words or phrases that jumped out at them; jot down your reflections; check the notes in your Study Bible for insight or help. Grapple with what the Spirit is saying to you, your group, the church—write down some applications.
- **Reflect & Apply Together:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- **Pray together:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for and lay one concern before the Lord.
- **Dig deeper**
 1. What do you learn about Jesus in this well known story?
 2. What do you think is significant about Jesus word to the disciples in verse 16?
 3. Why did Jesus need to go up on a mountainside to pray alone?
 4. What's one way that your life demonstrates utter dependence on God?
 5. What is God speaking to you about in this scripture and sermon?