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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
August 25, 2013
Hebrews 11:29-12:2
Luke 17:5-10

“Keep the Faith”

This morning I want to talk about the giants of our faith, people like Martin Luther King, Jr., whose iconic “I Have a Dream Speech” will celebrate its 50th anniversary this Wednesday.

But I also want to talk about the ordinary people who were there that day, like the people whose faces we just saw. Who are they?

Who were the two young women from MS who got off the bus at 3 am dressed in their Sunday best, fixing their hair and putting on a hat?

Who were the intrepid and jubilant CORE members who walked 230 miles from NYC to Washington DC?

Who were the young black men who erupted in cheers at the conclusion of the speech, and are they still cheering?

Who was the minister, quietly observing the march while smoking a pipe, dressed in his clerical collar? Did he get in trouble for attending the march, or for speaking up for civil rights, as so many clergy did?

What were the white woman and black man talking about, while dangling their feet in the reflecting pool? Did they know one another before that day?

Who was the young woman who was crying as she boarded the bus to go home to the Deep South? Did she stay in the south? Did the dream live on for her?

These are the people I want to talk about this morning.

Because while we know next to nothing about them, we do know that something in them took them to Washington on that historic day. Something in them lured them there. Perhaps it was curiosity. Maybe it was a friend. But my hunch is that for many of them it was a deep and abiding faith that one day, just as the prophet Isaiah said and King himself proclaimed that day, “that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.”

I have a hunch that the people who gathered that day had a deep and abiding faith that one day those words would ring true and would be more than just a dream.

I can only imagine that when they left Washington, they had great faith that something historic would come as a result of the march. After all, 200,000 people gathered that day.

And historic things did come . . .the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voters Rights Act of 1965, the opening of closed doors to people of color, the election of President Obama.

But there were also things no one wanted to see happen: civil rights protestors were met by tear gas and whips; King was assassinated.

On the one hand there were amazing results, but on the other hand there were big setbacks. No doubt some people lost faith as time went on and discouragement set in. And yet, the funny thing about faith is that sometimes it does lead to amazing results, but sometimes it leads to courageous endurance of torture and persecution. Faith can seem at times strangely ambiguous.

The author of Hebrews introduces this notion of faith in the story we heard today. On the one hand, faith led to amazing events like the crossing of the Red Sea and the Battle of Jericho. David and Samuel conquered kingdoms, became mighty in war, and put foreign armies to flight. The writer even says people of faith shut the mouths of lions, and quenched raging fires.

But the author also says that others were stoned to death, sawn in two, endured mocking and flogging, and were persecuted and tormented. Good people of faith endured horrific things.

There's a worldview and theology rampant these days that claims prosperity and blessings come automatically to those who are good and believe. Some people believe that faithfulness exempts one from bad things happening.

But the writer knows better, and cautions everyone who reads this that sometimes bad things do happen to good people of faith. And when those bad things happen, we must "lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, LOOK TO OUR CLOUD OF WITNESSES, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us."

But it's not easy. It's not easy to keep the faith when enduring persecution, it's not easy to keep on in spite of the odds or against the odds. It's not easy to keep running the race.

The disciples knew that. That's why they cry out to Jesus, "Increase our faith!" They knew keeping the faith was hard. They had heard Jesus say to a wanna-be follower who had to bury his father, let the dead bury the dead. He told other followers they must hate their families, parents, and children in order to follow him.

Jesus was relentless and exhausting and demanding.

So is it any wonder the disciples start to think that maybe it would be a whole lot easier to return to their families and livelihood. They're having genuine, valid reservations about the task at hand and wondering if they're up to the challenge.

They have serious doubts as to whether they can follow Jesus and step into the future to which he calls them. And you know what? Who here wouldn't have the same thoughts? "Increase our faith," they cry, because they don't think they can handle what's ahead.

But what the disciples haven't quite figured out is that faith is not a substance that can be measured, counted or quantified. Faith, as I've said before and said again last week, isn't something we possess as much as it is something we do.

Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall thinks there is no more important issue before the church today than moving away from the definition of faith as believing ideas about God and Jesus to be true and toward redefining faith as trusting God and following Jesus, even when you're struggling with the ideas themselves.

And that's just what the disciples did. They stepped out in faith and followed Jesus even when the way seemed murky, and they weren't sure they were up for the task. They took a risk to step into an unknown future.

It had to have been scary for them.

Which is why, I think, Jesus tells them, "You have all the faith you need. Even this much faith, the faith of a tiny mustard seed, is enough." A mustard seed sized faith-that's all you need. With very little, you can do great things, he said.

And that's true, isn't it? Great things have been done by people who had a dream and, in faith, pursued it with everything they had. One thinks of Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement; or Rosa Parks. Neither of them started out as giants-they were ordinary people-a minister, and a woman on a bus. They didn't hold any power. But they did have great faith, and because of that they did great things.

You know, I think too often we get the idea that in order to do great things we need great things-we need lots of money or wherewithal. But Jesus says today, you only need faith the size of a tiny mustard seed.

Ordinary people of faith, like the ones in these pictures, acted in an extraordinary way because they believed that God, who created humankind, actually loved the human race and evoked love in return.

Churches, communities of faith like this one, are in charge of keeping that vision, that dream, alive, and it happens every day in thousands of faith communities in ways that can only be called "mustard seeds," whenever, in the name of Jesus Christ, his followers reach out and respond to need with generosity and work for justice and peace.

This church performs “mustard seed acts of faith” everyday. One person bringing cans of food for Food Outreach helps one person with AIDS or cancer to not go hungry that day. That is a mustard seed, that reflects God’s love for everyone. Our continuing support for Lydia’s House, is another. The backpacks that provide food for hunry children on their weekends at home is a mustard seed. The community garden growing out back is a mustard seed faith.

When we have a mustard seed faith, we enact God’s love and we slowly tear down walls that divide people. We live the dream and work for the day when every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low,

Does this mean that everything we do will be met with open arms? No. Does it mean that everything we do will be successful? No. Will there be difficult days? Yes.

But people of faith do not give up. They keep persevering. They keep running the race.

On the first day of school, Henry came home after practice grinning from ear to ear. “I ran a 6 minute mile,” He exclaimed. For those of you who don’t know, that’s a big deal for a cross country runner. And it was an even bigger deal that the coach acknowledged his great run in front of the entire team, all 54 boys.

The next day after school he came home and exclaimed, “Coach told me to run with the guys trying out for varsity!” This is a really dig deal for a sophomore runner.

The next day, he came home but this time, wasn’t grinning from ear to ear. “How as practice?” I asked. “Not so good,” he said. Hard. Tough. Hot. Tired.

Did he give up, not return to practice on the 4th day? No, he didn’t. He went. And I think he had another hard day.

And he went the day after that, and the day after that. Because that’s what distance runners do.

Friends, I know not all of us here are literally distance runners. Lord knows I’m not. But we are all people of faith. And our journeys are not measured in sprints, but in long distances. There will be good times, and there will be bad times. But we are called to persevere, to run the race set before us, and to look to Jesus Christ the perfecter of our faith, who calls us to build the beloved community.

The things that we use to do that may not be big and spectacular and splashy; we are not big and spectacular and splashy. But we don’t have to be. Jesus doesn’t ask for big and splashy. Because ordinary people can do extraordinary things with something as small as a mustard seed.

Amen.

