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Luke 9:37-50

30th Message

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# LIFE OFF THE MOUNTAIN

*SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE*

Several years ago my wife Amy and I were members of a team from PBCC that went to minister in Romania. Once we arrived in Romania we broke into smaller groups and Amy and I, along with Jim Foster, met up with about twenty-five Romanians in the rugged mountains north of Bucharest. All of us stayed in a mountain chalet and in many ways it was heaven on earth. A few times a day we gathered to study the book of Ephesians on the side of the mountain, competing for space with nothing but shepherds and their sheep. The cool fresh air, the beautiful scenery, and the developing intimacy of our group was a blessing like no other. It was non-stop fellowship and glorious worship for a whole week. We didn't want it to end.

But end it did, and in the harshest way possible. Amy and I had to go down off this beautiful mountain-top experience into the hot and humid valley and hop on an over-crowded, stinky, extremely long train ride from Bucharest to Austria where soldiers with guns looked like they would rather arrest us than let us through the multiple check-points along the way. Needless to say, it was a very difficult transition from the mountain to the valley.

The Transfiguration of Jesus that we reflected on last week was the mountain-top experience of all mountain-top experiences. For Jesus, Peter, James, and John it was a place of rest, revelation, and glorious communion with God the Father. But as all must do eventually, they had to come down off the peaceful mountain into the tumultuous valley below.

On the mountain the disciples were commanded by God to listen to Jesus. Our passage this morning is dominated by a display of impotence from the disciples in the valley. They find themselves beyond their own abilities in various settings. They must listen to Jesus now more than ever.

**On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. And behold, a man from the crowd cried out, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. And behold, a spirit seizes him, and he suddenly cries out. It convulses him so that he foams at the mouth, and shatters him, and will hardly leave him. And I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not."** (Luke 9:37-40)

Jesus descended the mountain with Peter, James, and John to rejoin the other disciples who were waiting for them at the foot of the mountain. When they arrived a large crowd rushed to Jesus and a loud voice cried out to him as only a parent in deep pain can, "Teacher, I beg you...come look at my son...my one and only child."

In vivid detail, the father described his son's terrifying condition. Every day he must watch in horror as a force of darkness seeks to destroy his only child. An evil spirit unleashes destructive power against the boy, causing him to scream, convulse, and foam at the mouth. Such a mauling left the boy "shattered," beaten and bruised all over.

All of it is tortuous for both the son and the father. This is evidently a strong and fierce demon because Jesus' disciples, who have been known to do this kind of thing, failed in their attempt to throw out the evil spirit. But finally here is Jesus coming down the mountain, so the father with all the strength he can muster calls out to Jesus for help. Hearing this desperate cry from the father, Jesus stops and addresses the situation. He begins with a curious reply,

**Jesus answered, "O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here."** (Luke 9:41)

By using the term "generation," Jesus' question is directed at a very wide target. He is addressing all of those present: the father, the crowd, and the disciples. The boy must be healed and a whole "generation" needs restoration.

In using the phrase "how long" Jesus echoes the words of the Lord to Moses when, after God had performed many wonders for Israel during their wilderness journey, they still failed to listen and rely on God's promises; "The LORD said to Moses, 'How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs I have performed among them?'" (Num. 14:11)

This current generation, exemplified by the disciples and all those at the foot of the mountain, had been given many demonstrations of Jesus' power and authority and yet they still lack faith in him. We get further insight from the gospels of Matthew and Mark, where the disciples ask Jesus why they couldn't heal the boy, and he answers, "Because of your little faith," (Matthew 17:20) and "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer" (Mark 9:29).

Faith and prayer go hand in hand, and the disciples' failure was guaranteed when they expressed neither faith nor prayer in confronting the evil spirit. I believe pride was at the root of their failure. They relied on their own strength and failed to ask God for help because they were caught up in their previous success and were foolishly confident in the power of their own human resources. Their impotence against this fierce demon serves to heighten the drama for what comes next. Jesus asks that the child be brought to him and,

**While he was coming, the demon threw him to the ground and convulsed him. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit and healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And all were astonished at the majesty of God.** (Luke 9:42-43a)

As the boy is being brought to Jesus the evil spirit makes one last attempt to control the boy. This cruel and vicious spirit, like a big bully pushing around a weaker victim, throws the boy to the ground and causes his entire body to convulse. But this evil spirit is no match for Jesus. His rebuke is instantly effective. The demon is cast out and the boy is healed. It is not only the boy who is made whole but the father as well. His torment and anguish is also relieved. Jesus brings

liberation and healing to both. The father is given back his one and only son, and the family is restored.

It is a tremendous encouragement to me that the boy was healed by Jesus in spite of the deficient faith of the disciples. What a blessing to know that our incompetence does not hinder God's saving activity. The failure of the disciples would help them see their utter helplessness without the power of Jesus. They are learning that apart from him they can do nothing.

Though it may not be quite as obvious in our own day and age, we must always be ready for the bullying ways of Satan who "prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). He is a strong adversary, and though we may feel at times like we've been thrown to the ground, battered and bruised by the forces of darkness, we must never forget that there is hope; "greater is he who is in you, than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). What the Lord was able to do for this boy physically, he is able to do for all of us spiritually. Jesus can deliver us from the bondage of sin and death if we put our faith in him as our Savior.

The disciples were incompetent, but Jesus was competent to save. A powerful demon is overcome, a boy is healed, and a family is restored. The crowd is amazed at the majesty of God expressed through what Jesus does. However, Jesus knows that this generation that presently stands in awe will soon betray him, so he turns to his disciples and forecasts his coming passion a second time:

**But while they were all marveling at everything he was doing, Jesus said to his disciples, "Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men." But they did not understand this saying, and it was concealed from them, so that they might not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying. (Luke 9:43b-45)**

While the crowd is still buzzing with excitement and amazement at what Jesus had done, he takes this opportunity to gather his disciples and tell them that things will soon change, "Let my words sink deeply into your ears. Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you and do not forget. My time here is about to come to an end. This current adulation is not going to last. Just because the multitude marvels at me in this present moment does not negate what I told you earlier. I will be delivered into the hands of men."

This is the second time the disciples have heard Jesus mention the path that awaits him, and the second time they do not fully understand. Luke tells us that the reason they did not understand was because it was "concealed from them, so that they might not perceive it." The full meaning and import of God's plan of redemption through Jesus required divine revelation, and in God's sovereignty the eyes of their hearts were not opened at this time.

The disciples will ultimately understand, but not until the end of the story. In the present moment, instead of seeking greater insight from Jesus they are afraid to pursue the topic further with him. Though the disciples may not talk to Jesus about his upcoming exodus, they have no qualms talking behind his back about what will happen when he is gone.

**An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest. But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side and said to them, "Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For he who is least among you all is the one who is great. (Luke 9:46-48)**

Jesus' reminder that he will be "delivered into the hands of men" sets the disciples into a dispute over which of them is the top-dog, which one will be the leader of the pack once Jesus has gone. The disciples were keenly aware of and attracted to the pecking order that existed in all the political, military, and religious systems of their day.

Our world, too, is consumed by status. We believe the possession of certain titles, degrees, offices and positions raise our importance. We even speak of wearing power suits and power ties in the hope that we can clothe ourselves with status and strength. The way of the world is growing increasingly comparison-minded. We compare everything (the number of our Facebook friends, our education, our jobs, our children, our possessions, our vacations, our talents, even our spiritual gifts) all so that we can categorize, label, and evaluate those around us in order to elevate ourselves above them. Are you aware of this temptation in your life? Where does your self-serving pride display itself? What forms of status do you cling to?

The disciples are astute enough, however, not to have their argument about who is greatest in the presence of Jesus. Knowing their hearts, however, Jesus addresses the issue head-on because the self-centered, self-serving attitude of the disciples is no less demonic, no less destructive than the evil spirit within the boy. Their bitter jealousy and selfish ambition will destroy their unity, so, taking advantage of this teachable moment, Jesus invites a child to stand by his side.

Matthew's Gospel helps us understand this more fully in his report of what Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me" (Matthew 18:3-5).

Jesus brings to his side a child, because a child represents the humility necessary to enter the kingdom of God. The least among you, the child, the one who has nothing but faith in Jesus, that one is the greatest. If you want to be great, have the humble faith of a child.

Not only are they to have the humble faith of a child, they are to express that humility by receiving and honoring those who are like a child (the "least among you"). By placing a child in the position of honor at his side, Jesus is undermining every notion of status-building embraced by the disciples. It was common practice to receive (to honor, to show preference to) only those who were your equal or superior in social standing. That is how you elevated your own status.

Children, however, had no social standing, no money, no education, no rank, no power, and no influence. They had no privileges or status to bestow on those who received them. But Jesus welcomed them with all his heart. He identified with the lowly strongly. He says, "I am like this child, and when you humble yourself to welcome this child in my name you welcome me and the one who sent me."

Jesus identifies with the "least" even more concretely later when he enlightens his followers about the last days, "Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me'" (Matt. 25:37-40).

Our PBCC Kids Club ministry at Collins Elementary School, just down the street, is a wonderful example of this kind of love. They help the kids with their homework, and play crazy games with them. They sing worship songs with silly hand motions. They creatively teach Bible stories and memorize verses with the kids. They demonstrate in so many small and big ways to the children that God loves them.

It is a beautiful thing to behold. This team of dedicated adults and teens, who give so much of themselves to these children, exemplifies the kind of love and humility that Jesus is talking about, and they demonstrate in vivid-color, true “greatness”.

When, in the name of Jesus Christ, we welcome the “least,” the marginalized, and the ignored, we welcome not only that individual, but also the God who created them and the Son who gave his life to save them. What an amazing lesson from Jesus for his disciples and for us. Greatness is measured not by the height of our achievements, but by the depth of our dependence upon God and our love in Jesus’ name for those who are in no position to give us anything in return. This is what it means to be great.

Jesus’ comment to his disciples about welcoming a child “in his name” reminds John of something he wants to report to Jesus.

**John answered, “Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us.” But Jesus said to him, “Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you” (Luke 9:49-50).**

John says, “Master, we take the use of your name seriously so we stopped a man from casting out demons because he is not one of us. He was not commissioned by you like we were.” The disciples seemed to think they had exclusive rights to the “Jesus” brand, that they were the sole proprietors of the Jesus ministry franchise.

Jesus once again confronts their pride head-on and says, “Don’t stop him because whoever is not working against us is working with us.” Such people should be encouraged, says Jesus, for he is carrying on the same ministry that you are. There should be no rivalry or competition, but only appreciation and cooperation with all who express faith in Jesus and minister in his name.

Coming off the mountain was not easy for the disciples. Our passage this morning is filled with examples of their failure. Particularly, it is pride that gets in the way of their faith, their understanding, their humility, and their love for others.

The good news is that the ministry of Jesus is not hindered by their repeated failures, and in spite of their serious shortcomings he does not give up on them nor abandon them. Instead, with great compassion he continues to teach them, mold them, and love them all the way to the end. The same is true for us. God knows how frail and fragile our faith can be, and he is wonderfully patient with us in our journey.

Selfish pride is a temptation for all of us. It’s easy to get caught up in comparing ourselves to others, even easier to compare our church to other churches, but we must never fall prey to that temptation because comparison distances us from each other and it will destroy our unity as the local and the universal body of Christ.

Instead we must rejoice in the beauty of how God has called such a variety of individuals and congregations, each with its own strengths and weaknesses, to glorify him and reach out with his love to a needy world. In a world of self-promotion we, as imitators of Christ, are called to be humble. In the kingdom of God there is no ranking, no measuring, no comparing, for we are all his children, each one of us warmly embraced and deeply loved.

We do not advance the kingdom by adopting the attitude of the world, but by clothing ourselves with the attitude of Jesus, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2: 3-8).

Our selfish pride cannot be vanquished in our own strength. Praise be to God for the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross on our behalf, and the miraculous work of the Spirit, who through faith comes into our heart and transforms us into a new creation. As we surrender ourselves to his good work we grow into Christ’s image, growing in our humility and letting go of our pride and our self-exaltation, learning day by day to deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow Jesus in becoming and loving the “least” among us.

