

***With Great Power...***

By Rev. Jonathan A. Malone  
*Preached at Lower Merion Baptist Church  
Sunday, October 7, 2007; Bryn Mawr, PA  
Luke 17:5-10*

*"We are worthless servants; we have done only what we ought to have done!"*

*Movement 1 – Scarcity*

We live with a limited supply. Sometimes we have enough, sometimes we have more than enough and sometimes we do not have quite enough. We live with a limited, finite, measurable supply of resources. Our supply of food is limited. Our supply of money is limited. Our supply of energy is limited. Our time is limited. We live with a limited supply.

A basic plot device for many science fiction stories is based on a shortage of supplies. In most cases, the story paints one picture or another of a future society that has squandered its resources, that has gone beyond the point of replenishment, did not do anything to compensate for the dwindling resources and growing population, and now exists in a time of extreme scarcity. The basic things we take for granted, like clean water and fresh air are now things of the past. The novel, *Make Room! Make Room!* By Harry Harrison and the subsequent movie "Soylent Green" is based upon this premise. It takes place in a time when humanity does not have a sustainable way to live with the overpopulation, food shortage and a crisis of pollution. So different tactics, different approaches are embraced to insure the survival of the species. Hence the mysterious soylent green offered as a food substitute. There is a limited supply, and this science fiction stories among others are considering the long-term results of neglecting the limited supplies.

We live with a limited supply. We watch the futuristic movies, read the science fiction books, and nod our heads in understanding. We can conceive of the possibility of living without much. There are times when we look at our checking account and realize how little we have. There are times when we are setting the table for dinner and realize that we just don't have enough to go around. There are moments when we make a list of everything we need to do and realize that we cannot spread ourselves that thin. We live with a limited supply.

Lionel Robbins once described economics as, "the science which studies human behavior as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses." For Robbins, economics is the study of how humans live with a limited supply of resources; how do people live with scarcity? The on-line dictionary Wikipedia, describes scarcity as "the condition of human wants and needs exceeding production possibilities. In other words, society does not have sufficient productive resources to fulfill those wants and needs.... Not all of society's goals can be fully attained at the same time so that trade-offs are made of one good against others." We live with a limited supply of goods, of energy, of everything.

This is the nature of life. Life is limited, we aren't going to live forever, and we realize this most when we strive to find more of the intangible, of what may be our most valuable resource; time. Time is a scarcity; it is a fleeting thing that we are constantly in pursuit of, desiring and needing. We always want more time, and yet time is scarce, it is always moving, and we never seem to have enough. Ask the high school student who is

in a musical, and playing a varsity sport, and applying for college and trying to keep his or her grades in order about time, and you will hear, "I have none." Ask the college student who is working part time, who is trying to hold down a full course-load, who is involved in extra-curricular groups and who is trying to keep a social life about time and you will hear, "I have none." Ask the working parent, ask the stay at home parent, ask the grand parent, ask people and again and again you will hear that we all need more time. We live with a limited supply of time reminding us of the finite nature of our lives. Eventually our time will run out, and our lives will end. We live with a limited supply of time.

What about our faith? What about our relationship with Christ and the way in which we try to live out that relationship? What about our faith. I'm not speaking just about the normal anxieties of a church. All churches say that resources are scarce. All churches say that they do not have enough people. All churches say that the energy just isn't there. These are excuses and responses that you will hear in the large churches and the small churches. All churches tend to operate and do ministry based on a system of scarcity. I'm not going to speak to our resources just now. I'm not going to speak to the things we have, what I am wondering about is the root, the foundation of our being and gathering. What about our faith? Before you look at the budget, before you consider the people in the pews, and before you think about our savings let's ask about our faith.

Do we have enough faith to follow Jesus? Do we have enough faith to serve the Lord? Just before the passage for today, Jesus was calling the disciples to a certain standard of discipleship. Christ is warning the disciples that they need to keep from stumbling declaring that it would be better to tie a millstone around their neck and throw themselves into the sea than to stumble. This is a high expectation because we all stumble from time to time. This is a hard expectation because we all will find ourselves thinking and doing things that do not honor the Lord from time to time. We all stumble, and yet we are warned from stumbling. Then, as if raising the bar even more, Christ sets a standard for forgiveness. If you are wronged you are called to forgive. If you are wronged again, you are called to forgive again, and again and again. Even if someone offends you seven times a day you are to forgive that person each time. This is a high expectation.

Maybe you can understand the disciples' and the apostles' reaction. Maybe they have heard such a call, such a challenge and they wondered to themselves, how they could meet such expectations. They were stumbling, they were trying to forgive, but it felt like they did not have enough strength, they did not have enough character, and most importantly it seemed that they did not have enough faith. Maybe it felt like their faith was in a limited supply and they did not have enough to meet the high expectations of Jesus. Maybe it felt like they just did not have what Jesus was asking of them. Maybe they were worried that they could not meet the high standards Jesus set because they were working with only a limited supply. Like the time when someone challenged you to go into overseas ministries, and you replied, "I just don't think I have a strong enough faith to do such a thing." The time when someone called you to embrace urban ministry, to go into the neighborhoods riddled with drugs and violence and you honestly answer, "I just don't have enough faith." The time when you are asked to take a risk with your time, your resources and your life for something that is not guaranteed to succeed and you say, "I just don't have the faith."

Maybe if we had the faith of the centurion had enough faith that his servant was healed by Christ. Maybe if we had the faith of the friends who lowered their crippled friend through a roof to Christ believing that Christ would make him well. Maybe if we had the faith of the bleeding woman who touched Jesus' clothes, the blind man who cried out to Jesus as the Son of David, the criminal on Jesus' side at the cross then we would be able to accomplish the things we are challenged to do. Yet we wonder. Do we have enough? Do we have a sufficient supply of faith that we can do the things that Christ asks us to do? We only have so much courage, so much hope and so much faith. We are living with a limited supply.

### *Movement 2 – The Panic Response*

Our decisions and actions are shaped and we react to the limited supply that we have. We live with the reality of our scarcity and try to live well with our limited resources. Our decisions and actions are shaped around our living with a limited supply.

The day I received mail drops while hiking on the Appalachian Trail were days of surplus. I would have been hiking for a week or so, and my supplies, by the time I planned to receive mail would have been dwindling. I would have been low on food and other supplies (like toilet paper) and would have found myself living with a sense of anxiety. I would have found myself rationing out what little I had left to insure I would make it to tomorrow. Yet the day would come when I would find my way into town, via my thumb or my feet and I would go to the post office and find a package there waiting for me. It was a package that contained a replenishment of food and other supplies. A cornucopia of resources to add weight and to add hope to my pack was there for me to take and to enjoy. I was living with a surplus. Yet even on those days, I would still be very careful to ration my food. I would still be very cautious not to eat the snacks too quickly, to temper my enjoyment of the dried meats, or to keep from gorging into the ramen without any reserve. It was another week and another 140 miles at least until I would find another package. I had a limited supply and I had to make sure my eating habits were shaped in such a way that I would save the food I had. My decisions and actions were shaped around my limited supply.

We all live with a cautionary walk through life, watching our budget, being careful with our expenses and cautiously carrying our needs with a tempered spirit. When running a marathon, (if you find yourself in the crazy position to be running a marathon) we don't sprint but pace ourselves so as not to use up all of our energy right away. We put aside money for tomorrow so that we will have enough to survive. We shape our lives with our limited supply.

This is life. Our existence itself is limited. We know that we will eventually die, we know that we only have so much time, and so we make safe decisions, we make cautious decisions because we know that we only have so much time, that life is short and time is precious. There are moments when we find ourselves waking up in a panic, wondering about the short aspect of our lives, wondering about the fleeting moments of our lives, and we become anxious. How can we do everything that we want to do? How can we accomplish all that we think is important to accomplish? How can we truly live in a life that is limited? The theologian, Paul Tillich, claims that, "the impression of these events on the always latent awareness of our own having to die that produces anxiety.

Anxiety is finitude, experienced as one's own finitude" (from *The Courage to Be*). The limited nature of our own life shapes the way we live our life.

This moves beyond fiduciary matters and matters of resources and matters of philosophical living to matters of our faith. We wonder if we have enough faith. We watch Peter walk on water, we watch him struggle and begin to fall in and say to ourselves with a tisk and knowing glance that Peter did not have enough faith, and wonder if we do. What if we don't have enough, perhaps we would sink. So we are cautious to step out into the choppy waters, into the realm that does not offer any firm footing because we fear and we wonder if we might or might not have enough faith.

The disciples and the apostles may have been feeling anxious when hearing the high call of Christ. Christ set the bar high, and they did not have the energy, the resources, and the faith to reach the bar. They feared failure even before entering into ministry, even before trying because it seemed that their faith was limited, and what Christ was asking for required a great, mountain of faith. And so the disciples cried out, "increase our faith." The apostles cried out, "increase our faith." They both cried out looking for an assurance from Christ that they could receive enough to do the difficult work, the hard work that Christ was calling them to do.

In the church, as Christians we are faced time and again with situations that push and challenge us. Churches are surrounded by violence, are surrounded by apathy, and are surrounded by skepticism and a demand to prove their relevance. How can the church respond to such a wave of needs? How can the church respond to violence, how can the church respond to poverty, how can the church respond to apathy and skepticism? Such issues are looking for a mountain of faith and resources, and many churches only have a molehill. So many churches pull back from fully investing in a ministry for fear of scarcity. So many churches claim that we do not have the money, the people, and the resources, when really what they are claiming is that they do not have the faith. And so ministry is hedged and kept safe. Sermons are kept safe. The life of the church is focused only on pleasing those that we have in the building and not reaching out to those who are in need. With a vision to the future, with a focus to survive and exist as an institution for centuries, churches claim, we have not the resources, we have not the people, and we have not the faith to take on these waves in full force. Christ, increase our faith!

As Christians we are faced with situations that pull and challenge our faith. We find ourselves in situations when we have to ask for forgiveness and situations when we have to offer forgiveness. We find ourselves in situations when we confront evil, and when our own sin brings out evil. We find ourselves in situations when we are challenged to share, to open ourselves and to let God lead us. How can we again and again be a light to the world? How can we again and again promise to offer and to ask forgiveness? How can we again and again be the Christians that we feel Christ is calling us to be? We just aren't strong enough. We do not have the conviction. We do not have the faith. So we live our faith with half of a heart. We stay silent when the spirit moves us to talk. We sit down when we are pushed to stand. We try to stay safe and live a long, healthy and happy life with few risks. Christ, increase our faith!

Instead we walk with cautionary steps. We try to avoid the big problems. We try to be safe with our actions and our decisions. We try to be sure that whatever decision we make, a future will be assured. Stay off of the choppy waters and on the firm dry land. For we only have so much. We only have so much faith.

### *Movement 3 – Owning our Faith*

Yet we have the faith. Christ reminds us, and shows us that we have the faith necessary. Christ claims that we have all that we need. We have the faith that is required. We have all that we need.

Look closely at Christ's response. "If you had the faith the size of a mustard seed..." Look more closely, past the English translation to the Greek. Hear this passage as the early Christians would have heard it. You would not hear a conditional "if, then" statement. You would not hear Christ setting the bar again for the level and intensity and size of our faith. No instead you would hear Christ describing where the disciples potentially are, and where we potentially are with our faith. Preacher and biblical scholar Fred Craddock says that the "if" expresses a condition according to a fact, and the fact is that the disciples and the apostles have the faith. They have the faith of a mustard seed. Christ is saying, "If you have the faith of a mustard seed, which you do, then you can say to a mulberry tree to be uprooted and be planted in the sea." It is in the indicative mode, the faith is there, the action has already and is happening (the entire word is imperfective active indicative). Christ is telling his followers, the ones with the doubt and disbelief that they have enough faith. They have enough faith to perform feats that would go against nature. They have enough faith to command mountains to move. They have enough faith. It may seem small, it may seem the size of a mustard seed, but that is enough. The have enough faith.

We have had those moments when we realize that we have enough. When we stop counting beans, worrying if we have enough, and we step back and realize the immense pile before us, we realize that we have enough. When the boy brought forward his two loaves and his fishes to Jesus, Jesus assured him that it was enough. When churches stop for a moment with their worrying about financial matters and begin to count, to really count all of its valuable resources. It counts the building, proud, solid, and versatile, it counts the land it sits on, it counts the various funds it has in the bank, it counts all that is within the building, and finally it counts the people. Each person brings something that cannot be counted, that cannot be given a price. Each person brings value and worth. And the church realizes how much it has. This church has more than a mustard seed of faith. You have taken chances, you have done ministry that larger churches would not have attempted. From serving the hungry to sending people to Mississippi, to constantly being a foundational presence for folks who are hurting and suffering without thinking about the long term, you are living with more than a mustard seed of faith. Your giving shows your faith. In the last five months, giving has been noticeably higher than what has been expected. This is a sign of great faith. As a church we have much, and it starts with our faith!

When David went to face Goliath, Saul offered him armor and weapons. Saul thought that the shepherd boy did not have enough resources to defeat Goliath. Saul assumed that David needed more, but David went with his sling, with some smooth stones, and with a great faith in the Lord, and that was enough.

We have the faith of a mustard seed. We have the faith that can move mountains. We have the faith that can change the placement of trees. We have been given a great faith through Jesus Christ, and it is enough.

#### *Movement 4 – Christian Responsibility*

Can we accept and live with this gift? Can we claim this gift, our faith? Can we accept and live with our faith? I ask this because as soon as we realize what we have then we have to choose to accept or not accept. It is a moment of responsibility. This is a classic superhero dilemma. Characters such as Spiderman and Superman find out eventually that they have powers which set them apart from others. They realize that they have the potential to do great good or great harm, or to just be selfish. Hence the title of the sermon, a quote from Peter Parker's (the alias of Spiderman) Uncle Ben, "with great power also comes great responsibility". When Stan Lee penned this quote he was capturing the interior dilemma and wrestling of a young, emerging superhero. Yet it is a quote we can claim as well.

Christ says that we have this great faith. Christ claims that we have the faith of a mustard seed and can do great things. We need to ask ourselves if we want to try to follow the calling and the will of the Lord, or if we want to keep our faith to ourselves. Can we accept the responsibility that comes with our faith?

Before you answer, remember what is riding on your faith, remember what you have received through your faith; your life. Through our faith in Jesus Christ we believe that we can live without fear of judgment, of failure and even of finitude. Because of our faith we believe that we can be free of limits, that we will always be forgiven and that the love of God will give us the power to live the life that God calls us to live. Through our faith we can live.

God gives us life, God completes our life, and how can we respond? We respond by saying that we owe God much, that we are responsible to God and will offer what we have and who we are to the Lord. We have a great faith; do we take with it the great responsibility to walk with the Lord into the difficult land? Do we share our faith with others, do we walk into the choppy waters following the Lord, or do we stay on dry land caring only for ourselves? Can we accept and live into our faith?

The parable that Jesus offers speaks to our response. Jesus speaks of the life of a servant, the expectations of a servant, and the dedication to serve by the servant. When we realize all that Jesus did for all, the way that Jesus saved us, we realize that we are indebted to God. We realize all that we owe God, and we become servants of the Lord. Not with a sense of fear, nor of a binding duty, but out of a free response to God's love and our faith. We take our gift and we promise to use it in whatever way God calls us to be. Can we live, not just our own life, but the life that follows Christ? Can we accept the faith that Christ claims we can have? Can we accept that gift?

#### *Movement 5 – The Great Challenge*

Can we live into that responsibility? Can we accept the call and the challenge to truly be the servants of the Lord? Can we jump into the big challenges, the hard challenges, into God's challenges knowing that we have enough faith to continue to walk and live with Christ? Can we accept the responsibility of our faith in the Lord?

This is realizing that we have work to do, and we will serve until God says we are finished. It is not our place to say we have done enough. It is not our place to claim that we are finished, but the Lord's. We are only servants, and Christ is the master. We follow the Lord all the way to the cross and onto the cross, because we are servants of the Lord. The desire to set our terms of labor with the Lord is strong. The desire to tell God when

we do and do not want to live into our Christian identity is strong. Yet we must resist that desire. If God calls us to feed the hungry, we don't say I'll just feed those who live around me. We don't say I'll just tend to the hungry on weekends. We say yes to the Lord and do what we can to feed the hungry.

When God calls us to a forgiveness that transcends any expectations we don't say, Lord it is more than others would expect of me. We don't say, Lord, I can forgive but not that. We say yes to the Lord and trust that we do actually have the faith to lead us to forgiveness. We ask God for help and direction, and believe that with God, all things are possible. Even with the faith the size of a mustard seed can we accomplish much. We are called to ministry, not big or small, but God's ministry and we don't stop until the Lord calls us to rest. We don't plan a short-term exercise of our faith. We don't venture out cautiously for a day or two. No, we live as servants of the Lord, trusting we have enough and walking with our faith. Look at the tasks before us. We are called:

To offer forgiveness and grace to our brothers and sisters. Are we done, no!:

To reach out to the percentage of unchurched individuals trying to find a way to make it through life. To offer them Christ. Are we finished, no!

To offer food and hope to those who are held down and broken. The millions who are systematically beaten, neglected and forgotten. Are we finished? No!

To be so bold as to suggest that we are the ones who will change the world. Are we finished? No!

To be so bold as to be public with our own fallenness and sin so that the world can learn of God's grace. Are we finished? No!

We have all that we need. We have a gathered company of believers who have said yes to Christ. We have a people who have made the commitment to Christ. We can jump into the waters and to the world that we are called to minister to without ever worrying, without ever holding back. This is the responsibility of our faith that continues to live and serve the Lord.

#### *Movement 6 – A Seed of Faith is all We Need (Coda)*

Let us say yes and serve the Lord. Let us say yes and serve the Lord with courage and a hope that seems foolish to the world. Let us say yes and serve the Lord with what may seem to others to be bravado, but is what we know as an assurance. Let us no longer say we do not have enough. Let us no longer say that it cannot be done. Let us no longer say that we are not the people to answer God's call. Claim your faith and follow the Lord.

Last week the scripture challenged us to look to the needy at our doorstep, let's answer the call of the needy. Let's open our doors in a radical way that will not only let people enter this space, but let them be cared for, and transformed. Let us go out and bring others in, knowing that we can do it because of our faith. We may be facing impossible odds. We may be engaging in impossible tasks, but with our faith, with our Lord, we can trust that good work will be done.

God asks us, individually and as a church, to embrace a great ministry. God has given us a great commission. Turn from a response of scarcity and to a response of abundance. We have all that we need, for we have faith in the Lord. We have all that we need!

Let us say yes and serve the Lord with the freedom of knowing that we have enough, we are enough. We are the blessed servants of the Lord. Let us go and serve the Lord.

AMEN