

# Moving Mountains

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Luke 5:17-26

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Today I want to talk about the Spiritual Gift of Faith.

I shared this story at the evening service last week so if you were there, bear with me as I tell it again.

Last spring my daughter Anna was training and competing for various Track and Field events, one of which was the 400 meter race. My husband thought it would be good if we went up to the TISS track so she could do a little training one night, and then he had the brilliant idea that I could race against her for the training. As a family we all got into this. The mental show down began long before the actual race, with me telling my daughter I'd try to go easy on her but she'd better get ready cause she was "goin' down!". Anna threw it back at me, telling me not to be so confident because I was going to 'eat her dust'.

I don't know if you know anything about the 400 meter but it's a really difficult race to run. 400 meters is once around the track. It sounds and looks easy but it is very deceiving. You see you can't run it like a 100 meter, which is just an all out sprint. You won't make it if you try to sprint – you'll burn out before you hit 300 meters. But neither is this a long distance run where you find your stride and settle into a comfortable pace that you can maintain. It's somewhere in between.

I knew it wouldn't be easy. And certainly, if I had to pick between a sprint and a long distance endurance run, I'd pick endurance every time. I like to run, but I go through phases. At the time of the great challenge at the TISS track, I was running regularly. (Running might be an exaggeration. Most of the times it looks more like a plod, but running sounds much better.) I was in pretty good shape. I wasn't sure how this race would turn out, but I figured I had a reasonable chance against my then 12 year-old daughter.

When we got there I took the inside track and Anna took the fourth lane, her favourite, which meant that she started ahead of me, but you know it all works out to the same distance.

My husband Alex was the ref and signalled the beginning of the race. Once we had the signal we were off. Anna of course had the lead. I didn't want to burn out too quickly. My plan was to maintain a good quick pace for 300 meters and then an all out sprint for the last 100. So I didn't push too hard at first, but the problem was I didn't seem to be gaining on Anna. My pride was at stake, so I pushed it to catch up: the only problem was I didn't seem to be catching up. By the 100 mark I was a little worried. By the 200 mark I was freaking. This wasn't going the way it was supposed to. I knew it wouldn't be easy but it was harder than I imagined. Anna, trained as she was not to look back, didn't realize how much of a lead she had on me so she didn't let up for a second. By the 300 mark the race was over. There was no way I was going to catch her, let alone beat her. I was spent, and I literally slowed down and stopped. Then a little voice in my head said: "Come on, don't be such a poor sport, finish the race." So I mustered the next to no strength I had left and eventually staggered across the finish line. It was pathetic. A crushing defeat.

You know what was worse than that crushing defeat? Stanley came up to me a little later and said with great concern: "Mom, I feel so sorry for you". Had I lost but had a reasonable race, Stanley would have been all over me with "Ha! Ha! Mom, Anna killed you!" But no. He felt sorry for me. It's a little bit like when you stop receiving joke cards about your age on your birthday and instead only receive the nice sentimental ones. That's when you know you really are old. In that moment, I knew it was over. Time to send me out to pasture. Out to the back 40.

It was a humbling experience, but God spoke to me through it. I realized it was a bit like my life.

I spend a lot of time like a ping pong ball going from one extreme to the other. I go from thinking I am the strongest thing out there — I am super mom, super minister, super track star. Yes! I can do this. Nothing can stop me. Can't touch me! And then something happens. A speed bump, a hurdle, a defeat. And all of the sudden I'm stopped, thinking "I can't do it." "I'm not strong enough". "I might as well quit now. It's all over anyway. I should have known I wasn't strong enough or smart enough or popular enough or rich enough or brave enough..." I ping pong back and forth from thinking I'm super woman to thinking I am weak and worthless.

What God whispered to me after that race (which was really kind of fun in a crushing-humiliating kind of way), was "You are weaker than you think you are. You are stronger than you think you are." It's a lesson that will probably take me my whole life to learn. But I pray that someday it really will sink into this thick head. I am not strong enough to do it all. I am

not super woman. But I can do more than I think I can. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Here's the thing. Sometimes we think that faith looks like the strong one. A kind of blind or naive optimism full of ego that says "Hoowah!! I can do it!!" A kind of a pie in the sky or ostrich head in the sand outlook. And sometime we think that faith looks like the weak one, that dresses itself up as a resigned acceptance of God's will. "Oh well, God gave me this cross and I guess I just have to serenely accept what God has given to me. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away." But really, resigned acceptance can mean playing the victim and giving up on the race you've been called to run.

I believe that true faith is like an arrow that flies right through the middle between those two extremes. It is neither blind optimism, nor is it a giving up. There is no room for either ego or defeat in faith.

When I look at the stories of people Jesus healed or where Jesus marvels at their faith, it seems to me it's right there in the middle. Look at the woman who was haemorrhaging for 12 years. She had spent all she had on doctors. This was a woman who had reason to give up but didn't. She said to herself, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed". She didn't ask for him to lay his hands on her or pray for her, she somehow knew that if she just touched the edge, the fringe of his robe, it would be enough. And immediately she was healed, and Jesus, surrounded by a huge crowd, asks: "Who touched me?" And instead of bee lining it out of there in fear, still trembling, she took courage and looked him in the eye. He said to her: "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering." (Mark 5:24-34)

In the scripture lesson today, a man who was paralyzed was forgiven and healed because of faith. Though interestingly it was not because of his faith or not only because of his faith, but because of the faith of his friends. This group has a sense that they need to bring the man to Jesus, but there is a great crowd and it just doesn't seem possible. Instead of giving up, they find a way to move the mountains in front of them. They climb up to the roof and they lift up the clay tiles, dig through the roof and lower him down right in front of Jesus, who is teaching religious leaders. And the Bible says "When he saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." (Luke 5:20) It seems so often that when Jesus praises people for their faith the person or people have both *humility* and *chutzpah*.

A few years ago Jim Collins wrote the book *Good to Great*. In it Collins and his team analyse why some companies manage to make the leap from just being good companies to being great companies. In it he tells the story of Admiral Jim Stockdale who was in a prisoner of war camp in Vietnam for eight years. He survived that brutal experience, the torture, the solitary confinement and probably the worst suffering of never knowing when they would get out. Instead of coming out of that experience a broken man, he came out stronger. Jim Collins interviewed him and asked him who didn't survive in that place. The Admiral answered "Oh, that's easy...the optimists". Jim Collins was shocked at his answer, but Stockdale explained that the naive and blind optimists would say things like, "We'll be out by Christmas", but then Christmas would come and go and then they would say: "Well, we'll certainly be out by Easter" but then Easter would come and go and then they'd focus on Thanksgiving and then Christmas again, but all of these came and went. In the end, he said, the naive optimists died of a broken heart. He on the other hand faced the hard facts of his situation — that he had no idea when he would get out, and that he had to make the best of his situation while he was there.

One of the things that he did was develop an elaborate internal communications system to reduce the sense of isolation that their captors tried to create. It used a tapping code something similar to Morse code. At one point, during an imposed silence, the prisoners mopped and swept the central yard using the code, swish-swashing out "We love you" to Stockdale, on the third anniversary of his being shot down. Stockdale faced his brutal situation, but he also had a deep faith that in the end he would survive. He said "I never lost faith in the end of the story. I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade." When he was speaking about the blind optimists who held onto false hopes, Stockdale said: "This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end — which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be."

Jim Collins, the author of *Good to Great*, says that all companies that made the leap from good to great have an element of the Stockdale Paradox. They didn't have more lucky breaks or less adversity to deal with than the other companies. Instead they had the dream and vision of what they could become on the one hand, and the courage to face the brutal facts of a changing industry or recession or whatever difficulty on the other hand. What is true of a company is also true of churches, and it is even more true of strong people. It is not the absence of problems in life that makes a person good and strong, but how a person faces and overcomes problems. I believe that is the true definition of faith.

Yesterday as a nation we said goodbye to a great Canadian who had many of those qualities. I don't know what Jack Layton's personal faith was like. I know the Rev. Brent Hawkes, minister in the Metropolitan Community Church, whom I greatly admire, was a close friend and prayed with him as he drew closer to death, and I know he was a member of the United Church. I have a picture from Maclean's Magazine of Jack and Olivia descending the steps of Runnymede United with my brother Josh in the background, because that's where Josh goes to church. Regardless of your favourite political colour, Canadians have been inspired by Jack Layton's determination and hope in the face of incredible obstacles on the political level and on a personal level. The letter he wrote to Canada is infused with his warm, tenacious and optimistic spirit. His final words are already famous: "My friends, love is better than anger. Hope is better than fear. Optimism is better than despair. So let us be loving, hopeful and optimistic. And we'll change the world." Jack hoped he would be back as the leader of the opposition in September. People say he lost the battle. But I don't think he lost that battle because he didn't give up living. Death is not a defeat, it is just the passageway to eternal life that we will all travel through. Death is not a defeat unless you give up on living.

How do I know that? I just look at Jesus' life. Jesus faced betrayal, torture and death. It looked like defeat and smelled like defeat but on this side of the resurrection, the cross is not a symbol of sadness or defeat, but of life and victory.

At times life is challenging and sometimes it's brutal. Maybe you are in a race right now that you don't think you can win. If life is hard for you right now: Don't give up. Yes, you're weaker than you thought you were. That's OK. The truth is there is no room for your ego or your pride in this race. If you are willing to let go of your ego and even let go of the part of you that just wants to play the victim and say poor me — either way, if you're willing to take the focus off yourself and reach out to Jesus, then you will find a way through. That is the sweet spot of faith. It is not the promise of an easy life, but it is a deep down belief that if you reach out humbly and with great determination to the Lord, he will be there. Together, if you are willing to take the next step and the next, as you do that, you will find a way through. By the grace of God, you are stronger than you think you are. Faith knows that you can't do it alone. Faith also knows that you are not alone. And my friends this kind of faith will change the world. This kind of faith will move mountains.

So, "Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God."

Thanks be to God. Amen.