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Matthew 17:14–20, ESV.

¹⁴ And when they came to the crowd, a man came up to him and, kneeling before him, ¹⁵ said, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he has seizures and he suffers terribly. For often he falls into the fire, and often into the water. ¹⁶ And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him.” ¹⁷ And Jesus answered, “O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me.” ¹⁸ And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly. ¹⁹ Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” ²⁰ He said to them, “Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.”

Vibrant faith: *the Cave Church.*

When Wendy and I were in Egypt, we visited many unbelievably ancient and astonishing sites, the Pyramids and the Great Sphinx, of course, several tombs in the Valley of the Kings, and a number of Egyptian Temples. Egypt has by far the greatest number of major archeological sites of all the nations in the world. But before going to Egypt, I sent email to an old friend of mine, someone who was my very first Ph.D. student when I arrived at the University of Colorado at Boulder in 1982. His name is Nabil. Nabil is older now, just like me, with a wife who is a physician and three grown children. Nabil himself is a professor in Egypt, the chair

of his department. He spent three days showing Wendy and me around the Coptic, that is, the Christian, parts of Cairo. The visit that most impacted me was when we drove to the top of the Moqattam Mountain in a city called Zabbaleen – a city also known as the “City of Garbage”. We met people there who were truly living for their faith, living for the Kingdom of God and not the things of this world, and willing to do whatever necessary to keep alive their desire to worship God.

Consider this from the last Chapter of 1st Timothy, and it is Chapter 6:

¹¹ But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. ¹² Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. ¹³ I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, ¹⁴ to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵ which he will display at the proper time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, ¹⁶ who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

1 Timothy is attributed to the Paul, the great evangelist and the author of various Books of the Bible that have had a major impact on Christianity over the last two millennia, including Romans and the two letters to the believers in Corinth. The idea is that Paul wrote them to the young pastor Timothy as a way of advising him on how to proceed in his service to God and the People of God. Timothy was the leader of the church at Ephesus, in what is now Turkey, and when these letters

were written, Paul would have been an elderly man. But Paul's authorship is greatly debated, and many scholars believe that the Timothy letters were written by an anonymous person, perhaps as late as 140 A.D. We will probably never know the truth. But we will accept this letter as an amazing document, and the very first recorded manual on how to operate a church. It has been extremely influential in that regard. One thing is clear: by the time these letters were written, the Church was flourishing, rapidly expanding, and had a sophisticated leadership organization. Our quote tells us that Timothy is instructed to be driven by basic Christian principles in his approach to God and his treatment of people, and when dealing with false teachers of the faith. Timothy is to hold himself to the highest moral and ethical standards. He is to mimic the courage of Jesus Christ himself. But notice at the beginning of this passage it says that he should "*Fight the good fight of the faith,*" and "*Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called.*" This passage calls for Timothy to fight, when necessary, against evil. He is to look toward the eternal Kingdom of God - and not the things of his world. This is a call for intense bravery in the light of the ongoing brutal attack on the young Church.

This is the intensity I experienced at the top of Moqattam Mountain near Cairo in Egypt. This is a congregation that has built a church out of a cave – and that church seats 20,000. It is called the St. Simon Monastery, and it is the home

of a Coptic congregation outside Cairo. It is only informally called the Cave Church, and only very persistent visitors ever go there, because one has to pass through a series of narrow, crowded mountain streets as they wander through the neighborhood of many of the congregants. The neighborhood is called Manshiyat Naser, and the people of greater Cairo call it “Garbage City”. The residents, the people of the Cave Church, are called the Zabbaleen, but the citizens of Cairo call them the “Garbage People”. There are about 70,000 of them. So, what is this all about? These are marginalized people – because they are Christians in a Moslem nation. They scratch out a living by acting as recyclers. The people of this neighborhood collect trash from all around Cairo, bring it back to their rambling, informal facility, and manually sort it into cardboard, glass, metal, etc., and sell it in bulk to people who will reuse it. It is a massive operation. It is also one of the most effective recycling operations in the world, giving the citizens of Cairo a free service that recycles up to 90% of their trash – a truly amazing percentage, not matched by even the most industrialized nations. As you drive through this neighborhood, you pass trucks, motorcycles, bicycles, and donkey-driven carts piled high with vast amounts of refuse going uphill and recyclables going downhill. Much of the area smells like a landfill. Because they are a minority, they are relegated to living this way. These are believers doing whatever they have to do to support their

congregation and their church. They have found a way to survive as humans and to thrive as Christians. They are incredibly welcoming, hard-working, and loving people. The church itself was built in the 1960's. They found a small cave and blasted out 2.5 million tons of rock to expand the cave and build their incredible sanctuary. It is filled with stunning carvings, etched in the stone itself, and depicting such things as the birth of Jesus, the resurrection of Lazarus, and the story of Joseph from the Old Testament. There are also monastery buildings on the grounds. When they blasted the cave, they were nervous that they would attract the attention of their Moslem neighbors, so they waited until the end of the fast of Ramadan, when the Moslems shot off canons to let people know they could eat. When the canons went off, so did the dynamite – and no one in the rest of Cairo, down the mountain, noticed them building the Cave Church. Both the church and the recycling efforts are now internationally recognized facilities, and the church has a devoted congregation. We were there on the afternoon of the Sabbath – on Friday, to accommodate a Moslem weekly calendar – and hundreds of children were gleefully attending Sunday School. We drove through their massive recycling operations and up to the Church. A young woman immediately recognized us as visitors and showed us around. They asked nothing of us, but of course we gave them a donation.

Let's look at the Gospel of Matthew, from Chapter 17, starting with verse 14:

¹⁴ And when they came to the crowd, a man came up to him and, kneeling before him, ¹⁵ said, "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he has seizures and he suffers terribly. For often he falls into the fire, and often into the water. ¹⁶ And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him." ¹⁷ And Jesus answered, "O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me." ¹⁸ And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly. ¹⁹ Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" ²⁰ He said to them, "Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you."

This is one of Jesus' miracles, establishing him as the Messiah. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all place this event the day after the Transfiguration of Christ. Jesus, Peter, James, and John have come down the Mountain where Jesus has just revealed his true glory as the Messiah. But now, he will be the servant again, coming to the aid of a grief-stricken man. Jesus is also about to teach his Apostles that although they are loyal believers, their faith still has room to grow – just like the rest of us. A man asks for his son to be cured of a seizure disorder. The Apostles have just failed at curing him. The Gospel of Mark describes it this way, with the father of the boy speaking: *"Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. ¹⁸ And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able."* Jesus cures the boy, then gently rebukes his Apostles, telling them that

their problem is insufficient faith. With greater faith, they could, in fact, move a mountain.

This miracle – and in particular, the remark about moving a mountain that Jesus makes to his Apostles - means a lot to the so-called “Garbage People” of “Garbage City” of Cairo. That’s because their Church is dedicated to Saint Simon the Tanner, who is, by the way, not Simon the Apostle. This Simon lived in the late 900’s, and he is also not to be confused with the contemporary of Peter the Apostle, a man who is called Simon the Tanner in the New Testament, and who provided Peter with a place to stay. Simon the Tanner of Egypt worked as a tanner of hides. The Coptic Christians in Egypt have a story that dates to a time when Christians were being brutalized by the Islamic government. A Moslem Caliph had a Jewish minister who had told him about our passage from the three Gospels of the New Testament, where Jesus says that someone with faith in him can move a mountain. The Caliph sent for the Coptic Pope and told him that unless the Christians could make this verse come true, they would all be executed. The Pope and Simon the Tanner pray until the mountain shakes so violently it moves upward into the air. They perform this miracle three times, and the Caliph – who is himself now shaking in fear - is forced to acknowledge the truth and the power of the Christian faith and the Christian Messiah. The Christians are spared.

I cannot tell you if this story is true. But what I wanted to talk about today is the fact that there are people on this planet who do not have the privilege of practicing their faith as openly or as safely as we do in the U.S. 90% of Egypt is Moslem. 10% are Copts, and the people of St. Simon the Tanner in Cairo are an incredible example of people who live vibrant lives of faith. They are not Sunday Christians. For one thing, they have to hold their services on Friday because they are required to work on Sunday. They also practice their faith seven days a week. Most of the people of Saint Simon the Tanner live in hand-made homes that in this country would be bulldozed down as unsafe and unlivable. They go door to door in Cairo, a city of almost 10 million, collecting trash for free. They live among massive heaps of garbage and recyclables. As you reach the base of the mountain where they live, you see a nonstop movement of beat-up pickups and donkey carts going up and down the mountain. They are desperately poor. But their church is an engineering marvel, and it is meticulously clean. The younger adults, men and women in their twenties, spend their Friday afternoons teaching the children about the Bible, about Jesus, the Apostles, and their faith. When we were there, their service had ended hours before, but the Cave Church was still filled with people, most of them young, continuing to worship God and serve God by serving each other. The kids there, by the way, love to have their pictures taken with visitors.

This is an ancient – very ancient – community, which dates to the pre-Islamic invasion of Egypt. Their traditional language, Coptic, descends from the language of the Pharaohs, a language written in hieroglyphs. They have been the victims of numerous terrorist attacks in recent decades, and the Egyptian government has often failed to pursue their attackers. They have little representation in government, the police do not respond when they call, and they are looked down upon as tribal “garbage people”. Yet, they have found a way to not simply survive, but to thrive, to live radiant lives totally centered around their faith. They are unarmed and vulnerable – and all visitors to their town and church are embraced.

We don't face the discrimination and dangers that the Copts of Saint Simon the Tanner must confront every time they leave their mountain to collect garbage from the countless, tightly packed high rise apartment buildings of Cairo. We aren't forced to - very literally - live on the physical, economic, and social edges of society. But things are changing here in the U.S. The Copts were pretty much left alone and were safe until the Islamic revival of the 1970's. We have a humanism revival here, and like most Moslems, most non-believers in the U.S. mean us absolutely no harm. We do need to be careful, though, not about being attacked, not about being told we have to collect garbage for a living because we are Christians, but about being absorbed into a non-believing society. That is perhaps the benefit of persecution:

it draws a community together tightly and makes them appreciate the value of their faith. We saw very happy children in the Saint Simon community, laughing and playing and listening to young adults teach them about Christianity. Almost ironically, the adults, rather than living in fear, are raising their kids to live in joy and to walk in the Kingdom of God every day. The adults know how important it is for them to keep their ancient faith alive and healthy. It is believed that Saint Mark, a great evangelist, and the man to whom is attributed the Gospel of Mark, arrived in Egypt in about 62 A.D., which was during the Roman era. The believers there have been maintaining their faith and living vibrant lives of faith ever since – and absolutely nothing stops them. We need that kind of energy in our churches in the U.S. today. We don't know what is ahead of us in our lives or in the history of the world. Whatever happens, the worse it is, the more critical it will be for us to have the same resilience, determination, and joy that Wendy and I saw in the great recyclers, the so-called "Garbage People", the incredible people of faith in Cairo. Please pray with me.

God, inspire us to live with grace and with a vibrancy that will carry our faith forward for generation after generation. Lift us up and let us feel your presence. May our faith be so deep and so true that nothing will ever dampen our joy in believing. Amen.