

Sermon 100117 Hope
Scripture Matthew 13: 31-35
Sermon Title The Helpers

I watched in horror, like I expect you did, last month the horrible devastation wrought by hurricane Harvey, Irma then Marie. It wasn't just Texas and Florida, but other southern states as well as Caribbean Islands. Beautiful places where I have been like St. Thomas, St. Johns, St. Martin, and Puerto Rico with undreamed of destruction. We had the added concern for loved ones who are in Florida. My brother-in-law, Dean, and their house fared well in the storm, thank God.

There is no quick bounce-back from this sort of thing. The loss of power in Florida caused deaths in nursing homes. We don't know how long it will take for folks to put their lives back together.

During the midst of the hurricanes, I think it was Cathy Godfrey who posted on Facebook something I'd seen before. It was Mr. Rogers speaking of times of disasters. He said that his mother always said in those times to watch for the helpers. Those who help others in times of need. She said that the helpers give us hope. It's not just in times of natural disasters. Our youth at the Workcamp mission trip had a theme for the week. The theme was hope. So, I'd like to spend some time today looking at hope.

Any discussion of who the smartest person alive is would certainly include Dr. Steven Hawking. Dr. Hawking is a British Theoretical

Physicist and Cosmologist, which was the field of another scary smart person who is now passed, named Albert Einstein. Hawking is thought of as a modern-day Einstein. Hawking has updated some of Einstein's theories and disagreed with others. The idea of a debate between Einstein and Hawking would sell a lot of tickets. Personally, I would rather see a debate between Hawking and Jesus.

Hawking has made the statement, "The cosmos (meaning the universe- as a study-able physical entity) is all there is or ever was or ever will be." He is saying that there is nothing else beyond the cosmos. There is no room for God in this statement.

Another more recent statement from Hawking is this one; "Heaven is a fairy tale for people who are afraid of death." Now, these statements are from the greatest theoretical physicist in the world who commands great respect for his understanding of the cosmos. He is the leading living authority on the nature of the universe.

So in the debate with Jesus, what can Jesus say to respond to such grand and eloquent proclamations from the great Hawking? What is the statement that will make Hawking tremble? What is the statement that will make Hawking say, "Oh no, I never thought of that." What is the great knockout punch from Jesus to crumble Hawking's argument?

Are you ready? Here it is, “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed.” (Long pause) Okay, maybe that doesn’t sound like a knockout punch, but let’s unpack what the speakers are saying.

By saying, “The cosmos is all there is, ever was, and always will be.” Hawking is saying that the physical world, the study-able world, is all we have to work with. There is so much to study and learn that we can perceive with the senses that to concern yourself with that which you can’t perceive is folly. What you can see, hear, touch, smell, and taste is what you get, in Hawking’s view. You can see his point. A scientist needs something to study and cannot concern himself with imaginings.

There is plenty to study, too. The cosmos is so vast and our existence is so crowded, it is more about what to study and how to study it, than anything else. The really real, the actual, the discernable facts, can overwhelm the person trying to study them. Who has time to waste on anything else?

This world is complex. Much of our lives are spent just trying to cope with what is flying at us. How do we get along in this world with the bodies and brains that we have? How do we stay healthy? Fight cancer? How do we cope with the psychological tensions of modern living? How do we keep our heads above water economically? What about the environment? How about what seemingly are endless wars to fight? What about coping with natural disasters? Starvation?

Disease? What about the troubled marriage? The teens on psychotropic drugs? Isn't the real world too much to cope with already without adding to it?

Hawking calls heaven a fairy tale for those afraid of death. Maybe that's true. Science, even the great Hawking, cannot prove or disprove the existence of heaven. Fear of death is certainly real and widespread among the population, the faithful and otherwise. What happens when you die is not one of those study-ables. It is as big a mystery to the Hawkings of the world as it is to the dullards.

Now, there is One who we know was not afraid to die and that was Jesus Christ. He went to his torture and death willingly and knowingly. He went to his death for others. So, if there is anyone who has an answer to Hawking's proclamation that heaven is for people who are afraid to die, it is Jesus. What is Jesus' answer, what is his big counter-punch? "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed."

So, how does an insignificant seed take on the cosmos or represent heaven for Jesus? The mustard seed is so small, hard and seemingly insignificant. What is Jesus saying? Jesus is not just saying what the mustard seed is, he speaks of what it can become if nurtured properly. He is talking about the mustard seed's potential. Jesus says, "Though it is the smallest of seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of

the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch on its branches.” (MT 13: 32)

Think about a tiny seed and what it can become. It takes imagination, a lot of imagination, to envision what that hard little seed can become. Jesus is using the seed as a metaphor to show us that what is, what we see, hear, touch, smell, and taste, is small, hard, and insignificant compared to the kingdom of heaven. In this mustard seed parable, Jesus is giving us hope. Jesus speaks of a future that is not only better, but also unimaginably better.

Hawking’s statement that the cosmos is all there is, all there was, and all there ever will be, lacks not only God, but it lacks hope. Jesus’ mustard seed parable destroys Hawking’s proclamation with the simple but profound notion of hope.

Hope is an act of courage and imagination. Hope makes coping with this hard and unremitting world worthwhile. With hope we can endure all things. With hope, we can hold in our hearts that the future is so glorious when compared to the past and the present; we can deal with the hardships in this world.

That is what helpers do in times of emergency and affliction. They give us hope. Hope gives us a way to cope with the pains of this world. Hope allows us to see beyond what is, to see with our inner eye, what might and what ought to be. Hope triumphs over experience.

The greatest scientist in the world can neither prove nor disprove the belief that there is a heaven. Nor can the greatest scientist measure hope. Hope is an act of courage and imagination. Hope is at the core of Christian faith, and the mustard seed parable is one small example of the hope we get from Jesus.

Christian faith has always been prophetic. It speaks the time to come, of things that are not yet, of places we have not yet been to, of people we have not yet become. No past and no present is superior to the future that is yet to come. It is not just any future; it is God's future. We have hope from our Bibles and our Lord.

Hope is a matter of the heart, not the brain. Science can tell us a lot about the universe. It can tell us how vast it is, how old it is, whether it is expanding or contracting.

What science cannot tell us is whether the world is a friendly place with room for human hopes and aspirations. The helpers teach us that. That is a reason we come here to church. Church is the place where there is hope to be found in a mustard seed. AMEN