

“Demanding a Sign”

Matthew 12:38-45

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When our girls were little, they'd sometimes get in trouble for fighting, as little kids do. Whenever we would tell them to stop, it seemed like nothing would frustrate us more than when the girls started yelling about why it was somebody else's fault. Evelyne and I would want to say, “Just pipe down—no back-talk!” In fact, the biggest trouble the girls would get in was never for just doing something, it was having to argue and escalate afterward.

Our passage this morning shows how Jesus' opponents just couldn't accept what he said without giving a lot of back-talk. It continues the exchange taking place between Jesus and his adversaries the Pharisees that began in the opening of chapter 12. The story brings their opposition to Jesus into greater focus. Jesus isn't the aggressor here. We know that because Matthew says in verse 38, “Then some of the scribes and Pharisees *answered* him.” What are they demanding from Jesus? They want to see him do a miracle.

1. The Pharisees' request is a sign they have no faith. (v. 38-39a)

When they confronted Jesus, it wasn't out of genuine spiritual openness. In Matthew chapter 16 we read about another time Jesus' opponents wanted the same thing:

The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. (Matthew 16:1)

That tells us the attitude behind their question was a test, a trap, trying to set him up.

They've already seen plenty. Chapter 4 of Matthew's gospel tells us,

“And Jesus went about all Galilee...healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them.” (Matthew 4:23-24)

Chapters 8 and 9 tell how Jesus healed a leper, a Centurion's Servant, Peter's mother-in-law, the demon-possessed, and a paralytic. He healed a woman with bleeding, the blind, the mute, and a man with a withered hand. He calmed the storm and he raised a girl from the dead. Those things weren't done in corner, but out in the open, in front of the crowds. They were testimonies that Jesus' words and work were of one piece, they witnessed to who he was as God in the flesh. We know the Pharisees specifically witnessed his power at work, because they already set him up to do a miracle on the Sabbath so they could accuse him. (Matthew 12:10)

So Jesus is not impressed with the faith, and the Pharisees' demand for a sign is only a tactic to oppose him. And Jesus illustrates how they fall short of two examples from the Old Testament.

Maybe you remember the story of Jonah the Prophet. God sent him to preach, not to the people of God, but to Nineveh, the capital of Israel's enemies the Assyrians. He was supposed to give God's warning that the people of Nineveh needed to turn away from their sin and turn to God. Jonah didn't want to go, and so he got on a ship and sailed away. When a great storm threatened to sink the ship, the sailors blamed Jonah for causing God's anger, and they threw him overboard. God made a great fish come along and swallow Jonah, and he lived three days and nights in the fish until it spit him out onto the shore.

It's an interesting metaphor: Jesus said that was a picture of his being swallowed up by the earth when he was buried in a tomb, and his rising again in the resurrection.

The second story is about the Queen of Sheba, who traveled far to listen to Solomon, because she recognized in his wisdom the Word of God.

Jesus says the Pharisees had more evidence than the ancient Ninevites had, that cruel empire to the north of Israel, and those people had turned to God through the preaching of the prophet Jonah. He says they had more evidence than the ancient Queen of Sheba, who came to Israel to hear the Word of God through Solomon. They acted on what little they knew, but the Pharisees only opposed him. Asking for a sign was nothing more than trying to set him up, discredit him, avoid his claims on their lives. They already had plenty of evidence. What more did they need?

Let me ask you—what more do you need? God has done such glorious works. Even if you're not aware of having seen a miracle in your own life, still, the order, beauty, and intricacy of creation bears witness to the power and goodness of God. With the blessings of home and shelter and the care of the church we have evidence of God's care. With the great salvation he's given to us at the cost of his Son, what more do you need to trust him?

The Pharisees' demand was a sign they didn't have faith. Sometimes we keep asking for more, and don't act on the basis of what we've already seen of God's reality and faithfulness.

2. Jesus says only one sign will be given. (v. 39b-40)

Matthew has another place where the Pharisees demand a sign of Jesus, too. In chapter 16 we read,

He replied, "When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah." Jesus then left them and went away. (Matthew 16:2-3)

That isn't to say there are not many manifestations of Jesus' power, and that there aren't many proofs for God for those who have eyes to see. But one is enough, because ultimately, everything comes to the cross. His words are clear enough, aren't they? If we want the truth, we have enough to understand. Jesus himself says the meaning of it twice:

“One greater than Jonah is here.” (Matthew 12:41b)

“One greater than Solomon is here.” (Matthew 12:42:b)

Only one sign is ultimately needed, and we'll all be held accountable to that. There's going to be a definitive piece of evidence that Jesus is who he says he is. That sign is going to be overwhelming in its power, the sign of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.

That leads to the next observation:

3. Jesus gives us an example of repentant sinners. (vv. 41-42)

The cross and resurrection aren't just a nice story that inspires people. The cross is an event, the place where all the universe points, the place where God in freedom acted so we could be free. This is the saving ministry of Jesus Christ, and it's summed up in Paul's declaration,

For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 2:5)

A mediator is someone that brings together two parties that have been estranged with each other. Every one of us is by sinful nature estranged from God, and Jesus reconciles us with God,

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, (Ephesians 2:14)

That act of mediation, of reconciliation, takes place as we come to Jesus in simple trust for what he has done on the cross. Just like the bars of the cross reach up to God and out to each other, the cross is where we come together, with all our sins, all our weakness, all our brokenness and shortness of vision, all our mistakes and hurt, and where we find forgiveness and life.

We've been talking this year about being a missional, outreach-oriented congregation. That simply means doing the mission that Jesus called us to, to share the good news about Jesus, about his cross and resurrection. The cross is the center of everything.

For one thing, the cross is the center of your life if you trust in Jesus. Follow the example of the people in Nineveh, the example of the Queen of Sheba, those people who saw in the Word of God something better than themselves, bigger than their own limited vision, more beautiful than what they could possibly have imagined. If you trust Jesus, then he is the center, not you, not your preferences, and in coming to him you find life and light and freedom.

For another thing, the cross is the center of the world. It makes possible a relationship with God not just for you and me but for all people.

In April 2004 a Moroccan man named Sayf was in America, and he turned on the TV news. He watched a news story about an American truck driver named Tom Hamill who was kidnapped in Iraq. A few days later Sayf saw another story that showed Tom's family in church with a lot of people, praying to Jesus that Tom would be released. Sayf laughed at the people for praying to someone he thought was only a prophet. To him, it didn't make any sense to ask Jesus for anything. Then, a few days later, he turned on the TV again, and saw Tom Hamill standing free among American soldiers. All of a sudden, Sayf heard Jesus' voice saying, "You were mocking the Christian prayer. But I set him free." And it was like someone turned a switch in Sayf's heart.

He started to search for Christ, and he read the Bible, even as he continued to pray the Muslim prayers in Arabic, because Muslims think God only speaks Arabic.

Then Jesus spoke to him a second time. Sayf said, "It was a beautiful voice. I literally heard it; he spoke to me first in Arabic and then in French. He said, 'I am your Lord, and I know all languages.'" That was June 11, 2004, and Sayf has been following Jesus ever since. The death and resurrection of Jesus made it possible for Sayf to have new life. Now he sees everything through the perspective of Jesus.

Pastor Earl Palmer talks about the many times he's climbed Mount Shasta and Mount Rainier. On the way up, he says, you can lose your way, get lost in fog and snow, head on wrong tracks. But the great thing about a mountaintop, he says, is that's where all the lines converge. When you're on the peak, all the lines converge, and everything else falls away beneath you. It gives you perspective.

That's what the cross does. So Jesus told his followers,

"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:28)

Paul tells us that was fulfilled in God's perfect timing:

But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. (Galatians 4:4-5)

Jesus is the center of what God is doing in the world. All the lines converge on him.

He's the Good Shepherd who lays his life down for the sheep.

He's the sinless One who became the sacrifice for us.

He's the Servant who does the will of the Father.

Because he was pierced for our transgressions,

Crushed for our iniquities,

The punishment that brought us peace was upon him,

And by his wounds we are healed. (Isaiah 53:5)

So there's no

sin he can't forgive,

no past he can't heal,

no despair he can't make into joy.

No evil can defeat him, and no tomb can hold him.

What greater sign you need? Put your trust in him.