

September 16, 2018

I Believe, Help My Unbelief

Text: Mark 9:14-29

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior + Jesus Christ. Amen.

By a show of hands, how many of you have ever been in a situation where your faith was not as strong as it should have been, or to put it another way, how many of you have ever had "little faith?". I have. You have. We all have at some point and time in our life. What was the reason that your faith was not as strong as it should be? Was it being betrayed by someone you trusted? Did you ask God for something and found that His answer to your prayer was not what you thought or wanted it to be? Did it seem that no matter what you did, how hard you prayed, or how strongly you believed that things just never turned out the way that you thought they should? When we place our faith in something and we are constantly disappointed, we by nature, react with questioning thoughts and we tell ourselves, "Why should I believe if all I am ever going to do is be hurt and disappointed?".

That feeling you have about being let down, hurt, and disappointed, is the same feeling the father in our Gospel text this morning had as well. His son was demon possessed, and in being so, the father had found nobody who could help his child. Here we see a desperate father, doing what parents do when their child is sick and hurting: they seek out help, they go to experts, looking for answers, looking for healing, looking for hope.

In the father's search for someone or something to believe in, he goes to the disciples who had been going throughout the towns and villages casting out demons. Jesus had given them that authority to do so and the disciples had been pretty successful thus far, **"And he appointed the twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons" (Mark 3:14-15)**. But not here, not with this father, not with this boy. No matter how hard they tried they just couldn't do it. They spoke the words that Jesus had told them to speak, but nothing seemed to work. As a result, the disciples are at a loss for words, not understanding why they couldn't cast out the demon in this boy. And the father's heart grew even heavier, his hope diminished even more, his faith weakened to the point of desperation. And if this wasn't bad enough, some critics that had been waiting for Jesus began to argue with the disciples about the best way to cast out demons.

Our text then tells us that Jesus arrives on the scene with Peter, James, and John who had been away up on the Mountain of Transfiguration. When Jesus walks up, He inquires as to why the disciples were arguing with the critics. So the father answered Jesus and said, **“Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams (at the mouth) and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid.” (Mark 9:18).**

The father’s response is revealing to us in a couple of ways. One, it shows us that the disciples could not do what Jesus had given them the authority to do. They couldn’t cast out the demon because they did not fully trust in Christ’s promise that they could do it. Listen to our Lord’s words of rebuke to the disciples, **“O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me.” (Mark 9:19).** Jesus was frustrated with the disciples because of their lack of belief in Him and His promises.

The other thing the father’s response reveals to us is that Jesus still rebuked the father just not as harshly as He did to the disciples, **“Jesus said to him, ‘If you can’! All things are possible for one who believes.’” (Mark 9:23).** This rebuke of the father seemed like a jerk move by Jesus. But it wasn’t. Rather Jesus knew that when the father brought his son to Jesus, that he came in desperation, thinking “I have tried everything and everyone else. All that is left to try is Jesus.” Remember, the father was at the end of his rope because everything he had tried before had failed and even in Jesus, this man expected to be disappointed.

Both the disciples and the father lacked faith, they did not believe when they should have or in the one whom they should have **feared, loved, and trusted above all things. (Small Catechism, explanation to First Commandment).** The disciples had placed their faith in past successes and the father placed his faith in past failures. The disciples thought that just because they had cast out demons before they could do it again. The father believed that Jesus would fail him because everything and everyone before Jesus had failed him too.

Like the disciples, when things are going well, we have a tendency to place our faith, not on the Lord, but on our own success, thus relying on our own ability and skills. In doing so, we become so complacent that we begin to see our spiritual lives in the same way. We either say, “I don’t need Jesus to save my soul” or we decide that we need Jesus to help save us. Both ways are murderous for us. To think we don’t need Jesus to save us or to believe that we can cooperate with Jesus to save ourselves has eternal significance. It puts the power in our hands, it weakens our faith, it causes us to rely less and less on

God until finally we forget God all together. That place where we begin to believe that we don't need Jesus to save us is the place the devil wants us to be. His biggest strategy against us from the very beginning was to convince us that we don't need Jesus, that we are responsible for our own faith, that our relationship with Jesus depends on our decision to accept Christ.

And like the father in our text this morning, we become disappointed in the world when we are constantly let down. Satan whispers in our ear, "Hey buddy, the world let you down and so will Jesus." After hearing it long enough we believe it to be true especially when we do believe that we have to make a decision to accept Christ. It usually goes something like this: we accept Christ, asking Him to come into our heart and be our savior. This is called a sinner's prayer, something that is usually done during an altar call of some sorts. Then we feel exuberant, happy, ecstatic, like God really likes us, like everything will finally be better. But that same lie from Satan comes into play here too when we do our very best to be a good person, by our own strength, only to find that we have lied again, gossiped again, lusted and coveted again. Then that since of loss, disappointment and despair sets in again and we wonder, "Am I really saved?" Or to put it another way, we question, "Is God's promise of salvation really true for me?".

Friends, the only way out of this, the only way for our faith to be strengthened is to get to that place where we confess to God, **"I believe, help my unbelief."** We do fine getting there on our own, but when we do, when we confess to the Lord our sin of doubt and little faith, we come to the cross where our sins are forgiven and we are set free from the chains of sin. At the cross, again and again, the Holy Spirit brings to life in us a faith that is in Jesus alone. At the cross, the same Jesus that drove the demons from the boy in our Gospel text is the same Jesus who drives the demons from you in your baptism.

That is what Jesus does for you in your baptism. When you confess that you renounce the devil, his works, and his ways, then Jesus exorcises, or cast's out the demon, original sin, drowning the old Adam in you, with His words of promise of absolution, **"The almighty God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has given you the new birth of water and of the Spirit and has forgiven you all your sins, strengthen you with His grace to life + everlasting."** (Lutheran Service Book, page 271).

When we pray, **"I believe, help my unbelief,"** we acknowledge that our faith is weak and that we can do nothing to maintain it and strengthen it. And we don't have too because Jesus did it for you and still does. To put it another way, it's not what you do that saves you, but rather what God does that saves you. And what did He do for you?

He took upon himself your sin and carried them to the cross to save you. He suffered the wrath of God so that you don't have to suffer it yourself. He died, was buried, and rose again on the third day, for you, so that death doesn't have victory over you, so that you don't feel it's sting. The promise of the cross is the promise of your salvation. The world will fail you. You will fail yourself. Your faith will be weak at times, but Jesus will never fail you. Not now. Not ever. His promises are forever, for you. Amen.

May the peace of God which surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.