

2/18/2018

## If You Can?!

Scripture: Mark 9:14-32

Lenten Series: Questions Along the Way

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**Theme: When our attitude about Jesus is one of uncertainty or doubt, he brings attention to our lack of faith and reminds us of God's power (omnipotence) to do all things.**

Today is the First Sunday in the Season of Lent. As mentioned last week, this year we will use this time to not only contemplate the forty days of Christ's wilderness preparation for ministry and his final suffering and passion during Holy Week, but journey with him along the way from the Mount of Transfiguration to his final days in Jerusalem. We will consider some of the questions asked by and of Jesus himself. We will reflect upon the answers to those questions and some of the struggles we face in life, as they still have relevance to our lives now and in the future. And, we will hopefully grow as disciples of Christ, as we live out our faith day by day.

The first question we'll look at is one that is both of and by Jesus. **"If you can?!"** It comes in the midst of other questions and responses during an encounter shortly after Jesus was transfigured on the mountain and seen by Peter, James and John speaking with Moses and Elijah.

When Jesus, Peter, James and John returned down the mountain. . .

Mark 9:14-18: <sup>14</sup> . . . they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the (Jewish) law arguing with them. <sup>15</sup> As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him. <sup>16</sup> (He asked the scribes), **"What are you arguing about with them?"**

<sup>17</sup> A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. <sup>18</sup> Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

The father's words don't sound bitter or angry. But, surely he must have disappointment.

How would you have felt as that boy's father? Jesus' disciples had, after all, earlier been given authority to cast out demons and they did (Mark 6:7-13). Why could they not do so now?

They could not. They were not able. How often have you felt that way when someone in need requested something beyond your means? Or, perhaps you have been in the father's position, hoping that someone else could meet your need, only to feel the disappointment when they could not.

The scribes sought only to argue with the disciples, perhaps questioning their interpretation of the law or their authority to try to cast out demons.

**"You unbelieving generation,"** Jesus replied, **"how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?"**

These seemingly harsh words of Christ were meant for more than those immediately present. They were for all living in Christ's time. And, they can cause us to pause and reflect on our own faith or lack of it.

How long can we expect Jesus to stay and bear with us as we argue over the interpretation of God's teachings and authority or politics and power -- while so many people are suffering from the realities of spiritual, mental and physical disease and oppression?

How long shall Jesus put up with us when we lack the faith to follow our conscience in matters of moral and ethical living, whether individually, corporately, or in community?

***"Bring the boy to me."*** Jesus said.

So, they brought him, Mark tells us. And, when the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

Jesus asked the boy's father, *"How long has he been like this?"*

It is a question that we naturally ask when we are concerned about someone who is suffering.

We can often only imagine what it is like to live with a debilitating or life-threatening condition, like seizures, for a long time.

"From childhood," the father answered. "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. **But if you can do anything, have compassion for us and help us.**"

The Message translation phrases it as **"If you can do anything, do it."**

Now, I know that some people may not believe in demon possession, and they may want to explain this passage only in terms of a medical condition, perhaps epilepsy. But, I believe that while medical knowledge was largely limited or unscientific as we have it today, still there were instances of actual demon possession or oppression, as well as mental illness, which accounted for a large part of human suffering – and I believe still do.

Another terrible school shooting, leaving seventeen dead, made the headlines again this week. I have no doubt that mental illness played a part in the life of the young man who did the shooting. And, many people are focusing on the means to the action. But, I also firmly believe that the spirit is our basis of life, the mind is the builder, and the physical is usually the result. And, just as our spirit can be uplifted by God, it can also be oppressed or possessed by an evil force beyond us. And, what we do with or to our bodies can have a direct influence on our mind and spirit.

One of the most powerful examples of this today is the opioid crises. Let's watch and listen to this brief video . . . from "The Drs." TV Show as **"Recovering Opioid Addicts Share Their Stories"** of tragedy and hope; Recovering addicts in Dayton, Ohio share their stories of losing loved ones to overdoses and battling their own addictions to heroin, fentanyl and other common drugs. . . . <https://youtu.be/sklJROoMTX8>

Jesus said, ***"I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly."*** He wants that life for each of us here for all those we know and love and for everyone else on this planet.

And that brings us back to the real question of the day. It was first put to Jesus by the father of the demon possessed boy. Did you hear it just a minute ago? **“if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.”**

And what was Jesus response? . . .

† **“If you can’?!” said Jesus. “All things are possible for one who believes.”**

**If . . . you . . . can.** Some translations use a question mark, others an exclamation mark, after those three words pointing out the fact that they can be interpreted as either a question or an exclamation. That is why I have used both in my sermon title.

In other words, Jesus responds to the father’s question, as he often does, by turning it around upon the one asking.

We, too, might question Jesus, or God, if he is able to deliver us or others from conditions that have power over us. Jesus says, **“All things are possible for one who believes.”**

So, maybe Jesus is also referring to the man’s own part in the healing of his son. “If you can,” Jesus may be saying, throwing the issue back to the father himself. It is as though Jesus were saying, *“It’s not just whether I can do anything, but whether or not you can.”* Just as he declared at other times, it was the faith of others which brought healing and wholeness to themselves or those they loved.

I believe his words and his emphasis reflected both intentions. For taken either way, the words proclaim the same great truth of the power of God and the need of faith to make that power operative.

And, how did the boy’s father reply? Immediately he exclaimed, **“I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”**

Very often we find ourselves in the position of that boy’s father, again asking Jesus to help us believe more than we do. Our life is a process of spiritual growth – growing in faith as we walk daily with Christ. We must rely upon the Holy Spirit to guide and lead us in the way and empower us.

**When our attitude is one of uncertainty, doubt or despair, Jesus brings attention to our lack of faith and reminds us of God’s power (omnipotence) to do all things!**

Jesus can cast out our demons, as he did that boy. He can help overcome our unbelief as he did for the boy’s father.

One last question to be asked and answered by today’s passage:

After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, **“Why couldn’t we drive it out?”** Do you remember his reply? He said, “This kind can come out only by prayer.”

† **Don’t overlook the need for – and power of – prayer**

Here ,as elsewhere, the bible points out the effectiveness of prayer, of communing with God in the Spirit.

I know I have shared a witness with you already. And that is not to say that every prayer has been answered as I would have hoped at first. Sometimes in prayer or following it, God has given me a different answer that I have learned to accept as part of God's perfect and loving will, difficult as it may be at times. And, sometimes it means we just have to keep on praying, something Pastor Mark Batterson calls Circling Prayer.

You can tell from the testimonies of those struggling with addiction that it's a daily practice for continued recovery. And, we can join with them and others in prayer and victory over the demons we and they face each day. Deacon Megan, Rev. Jack, and I joined with the clergy of the Pen-Del Conference last week for a Bishop's Lenten Day Apart, where the keynote topic for the day was on responding to the opioid crisis. Prayer was one of the ways to help.

I know that I rely upon God's love and grace for all persons and in all circumstances. I realize and accept that God has called me to be part of his plan and will to bring healing, peace and freedom to all people. **"If you can?!",** he says to me.

My friends, Jesus says the same to each of us. For **"all things are possible for the one who believes."**

This Lenten season, I invite and challenge you to spend some time in contemplation and prayer on our Lord's suffering and death on the cross. But, also, be in prayerful communion with him to seek how you may be called and empowered to bring a miracle (even a minor one) into someone else's life. Some of the ways you can follow with Christ this season include things like helping and serving others, coming to church each Sunday, reading your bible, and praying with and for others.

There are opportunities to do great things for Christ's kingdom in and through our church, as many of you know by doing already. Invite someone else to join with you. Let me know of others in need of prayer or other assistance.

**If you can?! Yes, Lord. I know you can! And, with the power of the Holy Spirit, I can, too. And, so can each of you! Amen.**