
I BELIEVE, HELP MY UNBELIEF!
Sermon for the 17th Sunday after Pentecost, 2018
Make 9:14-29

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is the Gospel from before, Mark 9:14-29: **¹⁴When they came back to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵As soon as the whole crowd saw Jesus, they were amazed, and ran to Him and greeted Him.**

¹⁶He asked them, “What are you discussing with them?”

¹⁷Someone in the crowd answered, “Teacher, I brought to You my son, who has a spirit who has robbed him of speech. ¹⁸Wherever it takes hold of him, it throws him down, and he foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth, and becomes rigid. I asked Your disciples to cast the spirit out, but they could not.”

¹⁹Jesus answered them, “O you unbelieving generation! How long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him to Me!” ²⁰They brought the boy to Him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground, rolled around, and foamed at the mouth.

²¹Jesus asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?”

He said, “Since he has been a child. ²²It has often thrown him into fire or into water to destroy him. Nevertheless, if You are at all able, have compassion on us and help us!”

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²⁶It cried out, convulsed him violently, and came out. The boy became like a corpse, so that most of them were saying, “He has died.”

²⁷However, Jesus took hold of his hand and lifted him up, and he stood up. ²⁸After Jesus had gone into a house, His disciples asked Him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?”

²⁹He told them, “This kind cannot be driven out by any means except by prayer.”

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth, Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Our text today begins with the words ¹⁴ **When they came back to the other disciples**. Who were the “they” in our text? It was Jesus, Peter, James and John, and they had just returned to the other disciples immediately after Jesus’ transfiguration. The other nine disciples were at the foot of the mountain waiting for their return. While they were waiting, a father had brought his son to see Jesus. An evil spirit tormented the son, and the father wanted Jesus to remove it because apparently the disciples could not.

If a father came up to any one of us with a similar request, I am sure we would more than likely be a little bit bewildered. We would wonder “What could we do?” However, those disciples should have been able to help this father and his son. Why? Because earlier in His ministry, Jesus had appointed the *twelve, whom He also named “apostles,” that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach, and to have authority to cast out demons*, (Mark 3:14-15). Jesus has not given this authority to you and me in the same way that He gave it to His disciples. The disciples had received this authority and so they should have been able to drive the evil spirit out of the boy. Nevertheless, they were unable to help this boy.

There were also critics waiting for Jesus to come down from the mountain. By this time in His ministry, the scribes and Pharisees always sent a few of their people to keep an eye on Jesus. So, when the disciples failed to drive the demon out of the boy, a few of those critics began to debate them about the

best way to drive out demons. When Jesus arrived with Peter, James, and John, **they saw a large crowd around them and scribes arguing with them.** Jesus asked them, **“What are you discussing with them?”** ¹⁷ **Someone in the crowd answered, “Teacher, I brought to You my son, who has a spirit who has robbed him of speech.”** ¹⁸ **Wherever it takes hold of him, it throws him down, and he foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked Your disciples to cast the spirit out, but they could not.”**

Many commentators today say that the symptoms described here are so similar to what we know today as epilepsy. These same commentators in their own hearts deny the possibility of demon possession and even reject the existence of Satan and his evil angels. They claim that Mark, in writing as he did, reflected the mood and beliefs of his time, which, according to them, falsely ascribed many illnesses like epilepsy to demon possession. However, since what Mark wrote is God-breathed according to 2 Timothy 3:16, such commentators are really saying that God doesn't know what He's saying or that He accommodated Himself to the beliefs of that day. We cannot accept either of these judgements. If God's Word says the boy had **a spirit who has robbed him of speech**, then this is what the boy had. While it is true that we today do not identify many such cases of demon possession, perhaps the trouble is with us - we fail to recognise them. But we also know that the devil and his evil angels are sufficiently wise to adapt themselves to the times. Today we find their power displayed in the human attempts - usually by highly educated persons - to undermine Scripture and its teachings. False doctrine, cults, pagan religions, science that rejects Scripture - all these are the working of the devil.

Anyhow, it was a frightening sight, seeing this poor boy being demon possessed. This father had a great need and a heavy weight was upon his heart. He had come to Jesus in order for his son to be healed.

Jesus has the power to help, so when the father directed his faith toward Jesus asking Him to help, Jesus **rebuked the unclean spirit: “You speechless and deaf spirit, I command you, ‘Come out of him, and do not go into him again!’”**

The last part of Jesus' command where He said **do not go into him again!** was an important thing, for Jesus at another time described a spirit leaving someone and coming back later with reinforcements.¹

When Jesus gave the command to leave the boy and never return, the spirit had no choice. It had to leave. But it did not leave without first trying to resist. **“It cried out, convulsed (the boy) violently, and came out.”**

No doubt, the need of the son and the father was great. Our need is also great. Demon possessions like those of Jesus' day aren't so common and widespread today. However, the demon that possessed that boy is one of the devil's evil spirits and they still exist. The evil spirits of hell are still working today with the same goal as in Jesus' day. Just as that evil spirit wanted to destroy the son, so the devil's evil angels are working to destroy each of us eternally in hellfire.

The kind of spirit that did those things to that boy is the same kind of power and rulers of darkness against which we do battle, and it is a battle that we cannot fight and win by our own power. We must have the power and armour of God with us in that battle. Paul wrote to the Church at Ephesus: *“Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places,”* (Ephesians 6:11-12). Jesus gives us that power. A faith that looks to Jesus for help will find deliverance from enemies that are very real and dangerous.

So, as we go against these enemies and face the battle, our faith needs to rely on Jesus and the armour of God which He gives through His Word. Jesus had power over the demon that possessed the boy and He uses the same power for us! God's grace sent Jesus to suffer and die in order to defeat the realm of the devil, and that is exactly what Jesus has done! All the temptations that the devil throws at us, all our regrets, our feelings of unworthiness, all of these are met by Jesus who has the power and the grace to help.

¹ Matthew 12:43-45

Now, it is one thing to acknowledge Jesus' power to save and to provide, and His love and desire to help; but it's another thing to put complete confidence in that knowledge. While we acknowledge Jesus' ability to help, our faith relies in trust when we believe that He will fulfil our needs, that He is ready, able, and willing to serve us.

If only the confidence of relying on Jesus for every need was perfect within us! We have that confidence through faith in Christ, yet we act in weakness! A faith in Christ recognises that weakness. Unbelief doesn't see it as weakness at all. Unbelief sees it as logic, common sense, and realism. Unbelief says, "*No! My lack of trust, my scepticism, and my self-reliance is not weakness; I'm being realistic in this life and using the brains I have.*" Faith sees our weaknesses, our self-reliance as sin and trouble and a need.

The father who came to Jesus had weakness. He had first come to Jesus believing that Jesus could help. When Jesus wasn't there, the father gave the disciples a chance to try to cast the demon out of his son. He trusted that they, as Jesus' disciples, could do it, but they failed. So the father, faltering in weakness told Jesus, "...**if You are at all able, have compassion on us and help us!**"

The father had come believing that Jesus could help but that faith had been shaken. There was weakness. The man said "**if**" you can help me have compassion. Perhaps the man wondered if this case of demon-possession was too tough for Jesus. Jesus rebuked the man's weakness and said, "**With reference to 'If You are able' — all things are possible for him who believes.**" In other words, "*Don't ask if I can do anything. If you can believe, believe that God can do all things. What is impossible with man is completely possible with God. Not only can I help you, I will!*" **Immediately the child's father cried out, "I believe. Help my unbelief!"**

What a prayer! What a prayer of faith that believes - looks to Jesus - relies on Him for help - but also knows the weakness under stress. Faith at all times will see this weakness but rely on Christ and find in Him the perfection for its imperfection. If someone is boasting of his great faith, he doesn't understand his faith and he doesn't have anything upon which to stand. Paul wrote, "*He who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall,*" (1 Corinthians 10:12).

The disciples had faltered in their faith. Earlier they had received the command and authority from Jesus Himself to cast out demons.² But in this instance, they could not cast out the demon. **28After Jesus had gone into a house, His disciples asked Him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?”** **29He told them, “This kind cannot be driven out by any means except by prayer.”** In Matthew’s account of this event, we read, *“The disciples came to Jesus privately and said, ‘Why could we not cast it out?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you,”* (Matthew 17:19-20).

Perhaps the disciples were scared and doubted because Jesus wasn’t there with them when they tried to cast out the spirit. Perhaps the disciples were self-reliant, taking confidence in the fact that they had cast out demons before this and now they would do it again - forgetting from where the power came. After Jesus ascended into heaven we know the disciples remembered from where they received their power for they always ascribed their miracles to Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Jesus rebuked the father for his weakness, the disciples for their weakness, and the whole crowd when He said, **“O you unbelieving generation! How long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him to Me!”** Jesus had been among the people preaching and teaching. They had Him with them and yet they doubted. They were still not clear on all that He could do. Their faith had its weaknesses. Faith knows its weaknesses. It knows how those weaknesses come. Faith sorrows over the weaknesses. It takes Jesus’ rebukes to heart and then relies on Jesus in need.

A faith that knows its weakness under the stress and strain of sin also knows its need for growth and returns to its source for that growth. Jesus is the Author and Perfecter of our faith³ because His sacrifice and the news of our salvation in the Gospel has created that faith. Faith needs something to believe. We

² Mark 6:7

³ Hebrews 12:2

believe God's words and promises. The precious truth of salvation in the Gospel is what we hang our hopes upon and that is where we turn to give growth to our faith.

We pray for help in our unbelief to strengthen our faith, and God has given us the means to strengthen our faith by using His Word. So we pray that God would bless our study and the use of His Word so that the Means of Grace will cause our faith to grow.

Sometimes we might find ourselves saying: *"If I only had a stronger faith I would...."* or *"I know I can't move a mountain so I must not have a faith even the size of a mustard seed..."* or *"I can't cast out demons so my faith must be smaller than that of the disciples."* We need to understand Jesus' comparison carefully and the way in which He intended it. The disciples had the *ability* to cast out demons because Jesus had given them that special gift. He had told *them* to go out and do that. Their lack of faith had made them unable to complete His command. Jesus has not given us a similar command, so we do not need to go out expecting that if we had any kind of faith at all we could cast out demons. What Jesus says is, *"If I were to tell you to move a mountain, and I told you that the mountain would move for you - if you believe what I tell you (with faith the size of mustard seed) then you can do it no matter how big and seemingly impossible it is."* Our faith is rested upon what Jesus has given us in His Word. It rests upon His words and promises. He has promised to be with us, therefore, believe! Putting our faith in that promise, with His Word He will cause our faith to grow and strengthen and we will be able to accomplish all things. *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me!"* (Philippians 4:13).

When we use the Word of God as our guide for what we are doing, and we believe we can do it with Christ's blessing, He gives us the strength to do all those things. As we evaluate our life of faith each of us can say, *"I believe. I believe in Jesus as my Saviour. I am relying on Him for everything in my life here on earth and forever. But I know my weakness. I see my failures. I know my regrets. I know that at times I don't believe Jesus can do everything. So I recognise my weakness and go back to the Word - the subject of my faith - for strengthening and growth to chase away the unbelief."* All of that

understanding is wrapped up in one marvellous prayer that each of us can pray every day: **“I believe. Help my unbelief!”** Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we praise You for Your wisdom, power, and holiness. But, above all, we worship You for Your goodness and forgiving love to all who call on You. You have changed us from enemies into friends through the sufferings and death of Your Son, who became a human being for our sakes. We are Your children, and come to You confidently in His name with our prayers and requests.

Give us an awareness of Your majesty and power, and that holy fear of You that is the basis of all true wisdom. Continue to supply our daily needs, giving us life and breath, health and contentment, and protection from every kind of danger to body and soul.

Especially look with mercy on our moral and spiritual weakness. By Your Holy Spirit free us from the evil from which we cannot free ourselves, and give us new life through faith in Jesus Christ. May Jesus speak His word of forgiveness to us, and become the ruler of our consciences, the focus of our wills, the centre of our motives, and the Lord of our lives. Let Christ’s love for us fill Your Church. Enable all Your people to know more of the vastness of that love, although it can never be fully known. In its power may they love one another in the family of faith, show loving sympathy to all in need, and offer forgiveness to all their enemies. Fill us with such love for each other that we may avoid placing any obstacle that would cause a brother to sin against his over-scrupulous conscience.

Show the nations of the earth the fullness of Your goodness and grace, that they may turn to You, the only true God, and find salvation in Your Son Jesus Christ. Lord, You have been gracious to our land. Continue to bless us, that more and more may turn from evil, come to faith, and be made rich by Your gifts. Look with favour upon those who farm the soil, and send weather

appropriate to their needs, that they may continue in their work of feeding the world.

We pray also for a special measure of Your blessing on those who sorrow or mourn, those who suffer pain or sickness, and those who face temptation or danger. Because we ourselves deserve Your chastening and discipline, help us to receive in patience and humility whatever You send in our lives, knowing that You are lovingly preparing us for eternal fellowship with You.

O Lord, You are able to do so much more than we can ever ask for or even think of. Hear these prayers, and provide all our other needs, in the name of our blessed Redeemer and Lord Jesus Christ, who, together with You and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

17 Pentecost

Isaiah 50:4-10

⁴ “The Lord GOD has given Me the tongue of disciples, to know how to use a Word to sustain him who is tired out. He awakens Me morning after morning. He awakens My ear to listen, like those who are disciples. ⁵ The Lord GOD has opened My ear, and I Myself have not been rebellious. I have not turned back. ⁶ I have given My back to those who struck Me and My cheeks to those who plucked out My beard. I have not hidden My face from insults and spittle. ⁷ The Lord GOD will help Me. That is why I have not been disgraced. That is why I have set

My face like flint and know that I shall not be ashamed. ⁸ He who declares Me righteous is near. Who will contest a lawsuit against Me? Let us stand up together! Who is My accuser? Let him confront Me! ⁹ Look! The Lord GOD will come to help Me. Who is he who will condemn Me? Look! They will all wear out like a garment. The moths will eat them.”

¹⁰ Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the voice of His Servant? Let the one who has been walking in darkness and has had no light trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God!

James 3:1-12

¹ Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow-Christians! For you know that we shall be judged more severely. ² For we all commit many sins. If anyone does not sin in what he says, he is a perfect man, who can also keep his whole body in check. ³ If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we turn their whole bodies. ⁴ Look also at the ships. Although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, a very small rudder turns them wherever the inclination of the pilot leads him. ⁵ So also, the tongue is a small member of the body and yet it makes great boasts. See what a small fire sets such a large forest ablaze! ⁶ The tongue is also a fire. It is a world of wickedness in our members. It defiles the whole body, it sets the whole course of life aflame and is set aflame by hell. ⁷ For every creature, from animals to birds to reptiles and to sea-creatures, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. ⁸ However, no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

⁹ With the tongue we bless the Lord and Father and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. ¹⁰ Blessing and cursing come out of the same mouth. My fellow-Christians, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹ Surely a spring does not pour out both fresh and bitter water from the same opening? ¹² My fellow-Christians, surely a fig tree cannot produce olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

Mark 9:14-29

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