

17th Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 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 the sermon is the Gospel heard before, Mark 9:14-29.

14 When they came back to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and scribes arguing with them. 15 As soon as the whole crowd saw Jesus, they were amazed, and ran to Him and greeted Him.

16 He 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.”

19 Jesus 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!”

20 They 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.

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

He said, “Since he has been a child. 22 It 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!”

23 Jesus answered him, “With reference to ‘If You are able’ — all things are possible for him who believes.”

24 Immediately the child’s father cried out, “I believe. Help my unbelief!”

25 When Jesus saw that a crowd was running together towards Him, He rebuked the unclean spirit: “You speechless and deaf spirit, I command you, ‘Come out of him, and do not go into him again!’”

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

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

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

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

Dear friends in Christ,
Peace be with you.

The paragraph before today’s reading from the Gospel according to Mark begins with these words: **After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John with Him, and led them up onto a high mountain, by themselves and alone. He was transfigured before them, and His clothes became dazzling and very white, whiter than any launderer on earth could bleach them.** [Mark 9:2–3.]

This is the beginning of the account of the Transfiguration that we heard at the end of the Epiphany season last February. This means that Jesus, along with Peter, James, and John, were on their way back from the Transfiguration at the beginning of today’s reading. The other nine disciples were at the foot of the mountain waiting for their return. While they were waiting a father brought his son to see Jesus, which an evil spirit had tormented the son and his father and he wanted Jesus to remove it.

If a father came to you with this request, you would have every right to be more than a little bit confused. On the other hand, the disciples should have been able to help this father and his son. The difference is that earlier in His ministry, Jesus had 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.] Jesus has not given this authority to you in the same way that He gave it to

His disciples though. The disciples had received this authority and so they should have been able to drive the evil spirit out of the boy. Nevertheless, they weren't able 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 the disciples about the best way to drive out demons. **When they came back to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and scribes arguing with them.**

Jesus asked what the problem was, and the father came forward and answered Him, **“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.”**
19 Jesus answered them,

Jesus expressed His disappointment with the disciples in rather strong terms. 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 given the disciples authority over demons and they didn't trust His promise. He was frustrated by the the disciples' lack of faith.

When they brought the boy to Jesus, the demon's response reminds us that every demon knows who Jesus is. **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.** It's just as the Apostle James wrote; **“The demons believe - and shudder!”** [James 2:19.] The evil spirit in the boy was terrified of Jesus. Although the demon believed in Jesus, it only had the faith that knew an eternal future of punishment.

The father also had a kind of faith. It was the faith of desperation. It was as if he was thinking, “I've tried everything else and I've got nothing to lose by trying Jesus.” He said, **“...if You are at all able, have compassion on us and help us!”** The father had enough faith to bring his boy to Jesus, but it was the faith of desperation.

Jesus' rebuke of the boy's father is gentler than His rebuke of the disciples, but it is still a rebuke. Jesus said to him, **“With reference to ‘If You are able’ — all things are possible for him who believes.”** The father trusted in his past experiences. Everything he had tried before had failed. He expected disappointment once again.

The lack of faith in the disciples and the father represent the two possibilities for the faith that comes by human power. The disciples began to have faith in past success. The father began to have faith in past failures.

The disciples had at one time been able to drive out demons, but now they could not. Like many people who have success, they began to believe that the success was the result of their own skill and ability. They had begun to rely on their own power instead of the true source of power, - God. Like many people who experience God's blessings, they start to feel good about themselves and they began to forget about God.

The father had faith in a different kind of experience. No one had been able to heal his son. He had placed his faith in many earthly cures and been disappointed. When he asked for help, the disappointments of the past came through. He said, **“if You are at all able, have compassion on us and help us!”** The world had disappointed him so many times that his request had no confidence. He expected disappointment once again.

The struggles that the disciples and the father had with faith demonstrate the war that the devil, the world, and even our own sinful flesh constantly wage against us. One of their strategies is to convince us that we are responsible for our own faith ... that our relationship with Jesus depends on our decision to accept Christ.

The possibility that any part of salvation, including our faith, depends on us usually produces one of two possible reactions ... self-deception and despair. Despair asks: *“Is my faith strong enough;” “Am I really sincere;” “What happens to my faith when I fall asleep;” “What happens to faith during surgery;”* and so on. If you really are responsible for your own faith then you must be ready for every possibility. On the other hand, self-deception simply refuses to think about all these problems and proceeds in ignorance.

The truth is that if our faith truly did depend on us, we would never have it. The Apostle Paul reminds us that **we were dead in the trespasses and sins.** [Ephesians 2:1.] Dead people can do nothing much less work up any kind of faith. He also wrote, **This is so, because the way of thinking that belongs to the sinful nature is hostile to God. For it is not subordinate to God’s Law. For it is not even able to be.** [Romans 8:7.] From this we learn that not only is it impossible for anyone to produce faith within themselves, but the person without faith is hostile to God.

The only way out of this is for the Holy Spirit to put our old sinful nature to death. When Jesus drove the unclean spirit out of the boy He said, **“You speechless and deaf spirit, I command you, ‘Come out of him, and do not go into him again!’” It cried out, convulsed him violently, and came out. The boy became like a corpse, so that most of them were saying, “He has died.” However, Jesus took hold of his hand and lifted him up, and he stood up. After Jesus had gone into a house, His disciples asked Him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?”** The corpse-like appearance of the boy reminds us that the Old Adam in us must die with all sins and evil desires. Then, just as Jesus took the boy by the hand and raised him, the Holy Spirit must bring forth a new man in us.

The faith that the Holy Spirit brings to life in us is a faith in Jesus ... the same Jesus who drove the demon from the boy in today’s Gospel. Just as Jesus was the only solution for the demon-possessed son, so Jesus is the only solution for us. Just as Jesus dealt with the demon in today’s Gospel, He also deals with the sin in us. He does not ask us to work off our own sin. Instead, He worked off our sins for us. He took our sins onto Himself and then carried them to the cross. He took the punishment of our sins on Himself so that we do not have to suffer for them. He conquered sin with His suffering and death and then conquered death by rising from the grave. Now He offers the cure for sin to all mankind. This Jesus is the object of the faith that the Holy Spirit gives to us as He drowns the Old Adam and brings the new man to life in us.

This brings us back again to the father’s prayer: **“I believe; help my unbelief!”** When we Christians pray this prayer, we acknowledge that our faith is weak and we can do nothing to maintain it let alone strengthen it. We are crying out to God from our utter helplessness and begging Him to keep us in the one, true faith until He comes to take us home to Himself in heaven.

The Holy Spirit works to give us a faith that believes in God’s grace, not in our own works. He calls us to believe in the one who is the way, the truth, and the life. He calls us to believe in the one who drives out demons and gives us true life instead. He calls us to believe in Jesus Christ. The faith that comes from within us will fail. The faith that comes from the world will fail. Only the Holy Spirit’s gift of faith in Jesus Christ will last forever. And only through that faith will Jesus give us forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. **Amen.**

Prayer of the Church 17th Sunday after Pentecost

P In joyful confidence that our heavenly Father hears our requests and answers them according to His good and gracious will, let us pray for the Church, the flock redeemed by Christ the crucified, and for the needs of all people.

Brief Silence

P Gracious God and Father, You have established Your holy church to proclaim life and salvation to a world dominated by unbelief. Send faithful pastors, to us at the AELC, the harvest is ripe but the

workers are few, bless our lay people and teachers, and other servants to hold high the cross of Christ that through the life-giving work of Your Spirit that we may be led to confess Jesus as Lord. Lord, in Your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P Gracious God and Father, You had commanded us to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us. Grant us wisdom to speak well of others, even though they may speak ill of us, that our hearts may be ruled by humility as we joyfully follow the example of Your dear Son, who came not to be served, but to serve us all.... Lord in Your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P Gracious God and Father, grant us upright and faithful rulers who seek to fulfill their duties as leaders of our nation, states, and communities. Protect them from the temptations of power and greed, and mould them into wise and caring servants who work for the betterment of our society.... Lord, in Your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P Father of all compassion, be the strength for doctors, nurses, hospice care workers, and all who work to restore our health or care for us before death, and for those who protect us the police, state emergency workers, fire fighters and our army personal and their families, that they may be given wisdom, skill, and maintain a compassion for their tasks.... Lord in your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P Gracious God and Father, uphold and strengthen all those who endure the pain of injury and disease [especially _____]. Dispel all fear, silence any doubt, and, according to Your gracious will, grant healing and restoration, so that the sick may find renewed vigour to serve You and the neighbour.... Lord, in Your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P Gracious God and Father, at Your invitation we joyfully gather around the banquet table of Your Son Jesus to feast on His life-giving body and blood. Grant us the sure confidence of sins forgiven and fellowship restored within the body of Your Son, the Church.... Lord, in Your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P Father, the Source of all life and the life that never ends, help us in our unbelief, and receive our prayers this day that we offer to You in the name of Your beloved Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

C Amen.