

"Belief or Unbelief"

Mark 9:14-29

September 16, 2018

17th Sunday after Pentecost

This past week, our country once again commemorated one of the saddest days in its history. It's a day that's been called the Pearl Harbor of our generation: the day on which America was invaded by outside forces and American citizens were killed on American soil. All of us remember where we were and what we were doing on the day that is now identified simply as a number: 9/11. We remember and grieve the violation of our nation, the massive destruction of property, and especially the senseless and horrific loss of life.

Yet, at the same time, there is something deeply touching and profoundly moving which we remember about this day: the heroes. There were firefighters, running the wrong way, entering collapsing buildings as others were running out of them in order to save lives while risking, and in many cases losing, their lives. There were the passengers on the jet plane flying over Pennsylvania on the way to another target of destruction (some say the White House) who made a pact to fight the terrorists, call their friends and relatives to say that they love them, and then brought down the plane even though it meant the loss of their lives. There were all the people at the scenes of the crashes, helping and serving those affected by the destruction. This included chaplains, one of whom is a good friend of mine, Pastor Bill Wrede, a pastor in New York who happened to be going into the city that day and ended up serving a way he could never imagine.

When you hear stories like these, do you ever feel bad or guilty because you know that you could never possibly do something as heroic as these people did? Do you ever worry that, if you were put in a situation like this, you could cause the deaths of many people because you lack courage? Perhaps hearing these stories can cause discouragement and disappointment because such heroism does not reside in you and me and that if we were ever called upon to make such heroic efforts, we would fail and possibly cost people their lives.

Our feelings about faith may resemble our feelings about courage. There are so many people in the Bible who are sometimes called, "heroes of faith". We read about Noah building a huge boat in the middle of the desert, enduring ridicule and rejection from his neighbors, because he trusted the Lord's punishment of a worldwide flood. We read about a teenage shepherd boy, David, who kills mighty Goliath, a Philistine warrior who it scared off the entire army of Israel, with a shepherd's slingshot because he trusted the Lord's protection. We read about Elijah standing up to the evil King Ahab and the wicked Queen Jezebel and defeating the 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah on Mount Carmel because he trusted the Lord to send fire to consume the sacrifices. We read about a 15-year-old virgin girl from the back-water town of Nazareth named Mary who accepted the possibility of social rejection, the loss of a fiancé, and perhaps death as an adulteress in order to give birth to a baby boy whom an angel claimed to be the Son of God and Savior for the world because she trusted in the Lord.

Which of these faiths can you imitate or replicate? Sure, we enjoy reading the stories, but when we stop and think about it, we may grieve and feel bad because we

know that we do not possess such a “super” faith like these people in the Bible. These feelings may pop up when things are going alright. However, when times get really rough – a financial crisis, a terminal disease, or the death of a loved one – we may wonder if we have any faith at all. We fear how all of this will affect our eternity with our “sometimes on” and “sometimes off” faith.

Then we meet a “hero” of faith with whom we can easily identify in our text for today. This man is in crisis mode when he meets Jesus because of a very scary experience. His son is possessed by an evil spirit. The evil spirit is tormenting the son, causing him to be mute. The spirit seizes the son, throws him down, and causes the boy to foam at the mouth, grind his teeth, and become rigid. In addition, the spirit casts him into the fire and into the water in order to destroy him.

Naturally, the father is beside himself with fear and deep fatherly concern. This is no time for trite phrases such as, “Just trust in the Lord,” or “God has a plan here.” The circumstances make it very hard to believe that anything can be done to help his son.

When they bring the boy and his father to Jesus, the father explains the situation and shows as much faith as he can muster up. He says, “But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” The father apparently thinks Jesus can do something, but he’s not quite sure what Jesus will do or if he will do it. There is apparently some faith there. However, this father isn’t likely to make the cut for the next “heroes of Faith” book.

Jesus rebukes the father for his lack of faith by saying, “If you can!?! All things are possible for one who believes.” Is Jesus insensitive or overreacting here? No, not at all. He first points out the man’s weakened faith when he made Jesus’ help a conditional thing. He also stresses the positive aspect that says all things are possible for one who has faith.

Why this unfaithfulness? Is it merely a character flaw in this father’s personality? Is it justified due to the seriousness of the situation? No. Simply stated, lack of faith and failing to trust in God is sin. It all goes back to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Their sin was essentially lack of faith. Although they had everything they could possibly want or need, by virtue of the tree in the middle of the garden from which they were not to eat, they began to not trust God. Even though everything was going right, the fact that something was not permitted them made them wonder. Was God holding out on them? Was there something that tree provided which they needed and did not have? And, in wondering, they began to doubt God’s faithfulness, even though He had never given them the slightest reason ever to doubt Him.

This sin has plagued everyone who is living on this earth up into this present day where it plagues us. We may talk a lot about faith. We may claim to have faith. However, our actions don’t always show it. When we need help, to whom do we go? Usually, it’s to ourselves, our skills and our resources. If we fail to resolve the situation, then we might give God a chance. You hear phrases like, “Well, all we can do now is pray.”

When it comes to life and salvation where God has promised us a place in heaven prepared by Jesus for each one of us, do we trust that promise? Often, when you ask somebody about going to heaven, they might reply, “I think I’m going to

heaven,” as if believing God’s promise is being arrogant or cocky and that this is a more humble approach.

When life gets very difficult and we are plagued by the consequences of sin in our lives and in the world, we might adopt the same attitude as the man in our story. These might say something like, “Well, God, if you can help me with this problem, protect me from the situation, deliver me from this difficulty, then please have mercy on us and do whatever You can.”

Jesus’ words of rebuke to the father in our story are aimed at us as well. If you think that relying on yourself, humility with regard to heaven, or asking conditionally for help from Jesus is a good thing, you’re wrong. It is a lack of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and that is a sin.

What can we do? Trying harder to believe is not likely to be successful. Remaining in fear and suffering will do us no good. The simplest and most honest and effective way of dealing with this is to follow the father’s example in our story. We confess our faith and, at the same time, admit to our lack of faith. We say, as the father said, “I believe; help my unbelief!”

In our text, after His strong and brief rebuke, Jesus goes on and casts out the spirit from the young boy. Jesus restores the boy to health. Jesus gives the boy to his father. Are you surprised that that reaction? If the father’s faith was weak, why should Jesus help him? If our faith is full of doubt, why should Jesus help us? Doesn’t our lack of faith ruin it all?

The answer to that question is, “No,” and reveals an important lack of understanding regarding faith. Faith is very passive and not very active. By that, I mean that faith does not go out and get something for us, but faith receives what has already been gotten for us. Jesus has already gone out and gotten for us the forgiveness for all of our sins, our lives and relationship with the one true God, and our eternal life with Him in heaven. Faith merely receives what Jesus has already gotten.

God’s help, mercy, forgiveness, and life are not distributed based on the amount of faith we have or the strength of that faith. Otherwise, we would never receive a single thing from God since our faith is so often weak and, at times non-existent. Faith does not depend upon the strength and sincerity of the one who claims faith, but it depends upon the strength and faithfulness of the object of faith.

If we think of faith as holding on to God’s promises, then the comparison I’ve often used has to do with someone swept overboard from the ship at sea. If someone tosses him an anchor in order to save him and the drowning man grabs and holds on to this anchor with all his might, he will die as the anchor pulls him to the bottom of the sea. On the other hand, if someone tosses him a life preserver which he holds on to by the tips of his fingernails, he will be saved as the lifesaver keeps his head above water. The one with the strong “holding on” died while the one with weak “holding on” lived and the difference was the object of their faith.

It is the same way with Biblical faith. A strong faith holding on to the wrong object of faith will receive no help. Yet a very weak faith, grasping on to the correct object will receive whatever she needs. It is not faith, but the object of faith.

In our story, this is shown to be true. The father who gravitates between faith and unbelief receives that which he asked the Lord for. Jesus was able to overcome the evil spirit, cast him out, and restore the boy to health and to his father even though his father's faith was not complete and there's no mention at all of the boy's faith either. The disciples and others who had tried desperately to accomplish the exorcism failed.

This offers us comfort and hope for our futures as well. Continue to hold on to Christ who has freed you from sin, saved you from death, and prepared a place for each of you in heaven by His perfect life in obedience to the Law of God in your place; by His sacrificial death on the cross to earn forgiveness for all of your sin; and by His glorious resurrection from the dead which has guaranteed your life beyond the grave, too, hold on to Christ, by faith, during the good times, the difficult times, and even the horrific times.

If and when you find yourself slipping and you feel that you believe, but that unbelief is plaguing you, then take advantage of the means by which our Lord gives you to strengthen that faith. Hear His Word which not only delivers the promises of what God will do for you and me, but also contains the power to accomplish these promises for you and me. Hear His Word in Divine Service, in Sunday School and Bible Class. And, especially, be in the Word of God on a regular basis by yourself.

In order to have the strongest and most faith filled relationship with your Lord and Savior, then strengthen that relationship by interacting with the Lord in the most intimate ways. Eat His body and drink His blood, not only for the forgiveness of your sins, but also as a way to strengthen that relationship with your Lord will never let you down.

Finally, be involved in true fellowship with your God and with your brothers and sisters in Christ by being here on Sundays and Wednesday evenings. Be here to support, encourage, and receive help for yourself regarding the whole matter of faith. Strengthen each other as you are strengthened as well.

Among all of the lists and books and other materials which put out a list of "heroes of Faith", you're not likely to find the father in our text on any list. He fears instead of being calm. He believes, but only to a certain extent and then disbelieves. He has doubts and unbelief when things are going really bad. In other words, this man is just like you and me. Yet, Jesus saves his son and restores him even though the father's faith had flaws and was imperfect.

In the same way, our Lord, when we act like this father from the story and our faith is weak and mixed with unbelief, will nevertheless be loved by our Lord, healed of our sin, and restored to our relationship with God until we pass through life and the grave and death and arrive at a place where faith is no longer needed. So, when things get really tough and you don't know if you will survive and you feel the doubt spring up inside of you, threatening to overcome your faith, make this father's response to Jesus into your short and frequently prayed prayer, "I believe; help my unbelief!" And he will. Amen.