

"Help My Unbelief"

Mark 9:14-29

September 16, 2012

16th Sunday After Pentecost

Faith is an important thing for most people who call themselves Christians. Christians will often talk about the importance of faith during crucial times. During times of great suffering, many will say, "I still have my faith." When someone loses a loved one to death, many will say, "My faith got me through it." Is this a good approach to take? Is faith something we can rely on? Can your faith get you through terrible times?

In our text today – the account of a boy possessed by an unclean spirit – how did it work out for the disciples of Jesus or the father of this boy to depend on their faith to get them through? Not so well. The father brought his son to the disciples while Jesus, along with Peter, James, and John, were on the mountain of transfiguration. He asked the disciples to cast out the spirit. They were unable. (The word literally means "not strong enough".) Why not? They had faith. Many commentators think that, although their faith was supposedly in Jesus, was turning more toward themselves. After all, they were followers of Jesus. They were special. They should be able to handle something like exorcizing an evil spirit from a boy, but they couldn't.

When Jesus and the three disciples came down from the mountain to find out what was going on, the boy's father came to him and explained the situation. The father had faith that Jesus could help his son. When the boy was brought to Jesus, the evil spirit took control. It convulsed the boy. He fell on the ground, rolled about, and foamed at the mouth. What a scary sight this must have been, especially if it is your son is the one who is being possessed. Suddenly, it wasn't so easy to believe. The father tells Jesus how the spirit has possessed his son since childhood and how the spirit had tried to destroy his son by throwing him into fire and into water. The severity and strength of the circumstances became too much for the father. The best he can say is, "If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." This is not exactly a ringing endorsement of the

man's faith in Jesus. The man trusted more in the ability of the circumstances to hurt his son than he trusted in the power of Jesus to help his son.

We can have misunderstandings about faith, as well. First of all, many people today think that faith is dependable because they came up with it. Faith comes about through an act of the will, they think. After considering Biblical claims, one makes a decision to trust in Jesus. But that's not true. We cannot, on our own, come to faith in Jesus Christ because of sin. Sin is the opposite of faith. Sin means not trusting in God. Sin means believing the promises of something other than God. Sin entered the world because Adam and Eve stopped trusting in God and began trusting in themselves. They stopped believing in the reality of God around them (since they lived by sight, not by faith) and began believing the promises of Satan.

Ever since then, those who are joined to Adam by virtue of their physical birth are unable to have faith in God. We cannot confess Christ. The Bible says, "no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit." (1 Cor. 12:4) We cannot come to faith on the basis of a rational decision on our own. The Bible says, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them." (1 Cor. 2:14).

However, in Holy Baptism, God grants us His Holy Spirit, cleanses us from the sin that separates us from Him, and gives us the gift of faith to believe that. As the familiar passage from Ephesians goes, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast." (Eph. 2:8-9)

Yet, even when we acknowledge that faith is something God gives us, we act as if faith is then our responsibility to maintain. This can lead us to act like the disciples in the text. We say that we trust in the Lord (as long as everything is going smoothly), but we *act* as if we really trust in ourselves to take care of troublesome circumstances.

This can also lead us to act like the father in our text. We have faith in Christ as long as circumstances don't get too bad and we can handle them. But when circumstances get too bad, then faith fades.

What are we to do? Many would say you just have to have a stronger faith. Promises are made that, if you just have a stronger faith, then you will overcome whatever problems face you and experience true blessedness. However, if the problems remain, you not only suffer under the same problems, but you have to deal with the guilt of having a weak faith.

But some will say, "Isn't that what Jesus says in the text?" Jesus does say, "All things are possible for one who believes." But this is not a call for you to get your faith right. It is a call to have the object of your faith right. Despite what many will say, it is not the strength of your faith which is important, but it is the object of your faith which is most important.

Faith is not just what you know and confess (although it does include these things). Faith is what you put your trust in - what you hold on to. Consider a situation in which you are drowning at sea. If someone threw you an anchor to save you, you could trust that anchor all you wanted and hold on to it as tight as you can, but you'll go straight to the bottom of the sea, drown, and die. However, if someone throws you a life preserver and you trust it and hold tight to it, you will float and live. What's the difference? The trust and holding on are equal. The difference is that one object of that trust and holding on is able to save you and the other is not.

Jesus is the only object of faith which will save. In our text, it was not the faith of the disciples or the faith of the father that saves the young boy. It is Jesus who saves. The unclean spirit does his worst to hurt the young boy - trying to destroy him in fire and water, trying to frighten those around him by his unholy show of making him roll on the ground and foam at the mouth. Yet Jesus, apart from the strength or weakness of the disciples' faith or the father's faith and apart from any faith the son has or doesn't have, is able to cast out the spirit, save the son, and restore Him to perfect health.

That is precisely what Jesus has done for you and me. We were born in sin and under Satan's control. Satan does his worst to destroy us or frighten us out of faith. Yet Jesus, apart from any faith we might have, weak or strong, and before we even have that faith, saves us. He pays the price for our sin by which Satan has us under his control by taking God's judgment against and punishment for sin on the cross. His death forgives our sin and frees us from Satan's control

His death also destroys death, the only tool by which Satan can frighten us out of faith. By rising from the dead, Jesus proves that death has lost its power to frighten us or hold us. Because Jesus lives again, we, too, will live after death without sin, without suffering, and without Satan forever in heaven.

If your faith is always in your faith, you will ultimately lose because your faith can do nothing. However, if your faith is in Jesus, you will ultimately win because your Savior has done everything. Faith has no power in itself. Faith merely receives what the power of Jesus has accomplished: forgiveness for sin, freedom from Satan's control, and a forever with Him in indescribable joy and peace.

Keep the object of your faith correct, but also keep in mind your frailty as a sinful human being. When we think faith depends on us and our strength, we get into trouble. In our text, when Jesus said, "All things are possible for one who believes", He was essentially saying, "If you trust in me, I can do anything for you." The father's pride is broken and he "gets it". He says, "I believe; help my unbelief." In other words, he confesses faith in Christ while, at the same time, recognizing his own sinful weakness. He neither depends upon himself nor denies his weakness. He puts it all on Christ. He trusts in Christ to help him and in Christ to overcome his unbelief.

Now Jesus could deny the father's petition because his faith is too weak in some instances and non-existent in other places. Jesus could make him wait until his faith gets a little stronger. But Jesus does neither. As one commentator puts it, "The father cries for God's help, honestly confessing the paucity of his faith; and the Lord answers, not according to the paucity of the asking but according to the riches of His grace." (Tyndale, p.147)

It's great to confess faith, but it's also okay to admit lack of faith. God's response to your need does not depend upon the size of your faith, but the size of His grace and mercy. God's help does not depend on what you do, but upon what He has done for you. He saves us from sin and every consequence of sin – suffering, sickness, and even death – by His grace. Salvation is all His doing. He gives us the faith to receive those benefits. The creation of faith is all His doing. He strengthens

faith where it is present and restores it when it is lacking by calling us back to our baptism where Satan was exorcized from our lives, by feeding us with His body and blood in Holy Communion where we receive His forgiveness, and by placing us in a congregation with brothers and sisters in Christ who can strengthen and encourage us in our faith life.

Some look at the father's response as, at best, a sign of weakness or, at worst, a lack of faith. It is neither. It is, in effect, a very honest prayer. It is one of my favorite prayers that I personally use a lot. I would invite you to consider it as well. When you are faced by a big problem or a crisis of conscience, don't feel that you have to handle it yourself or pretend that doubt doesn't exist within you. When you have faith in Jesus to deliver you, but you are so troubled by outward circumstance that you are finding it hard to believe, it's ok to use the words of the father of the spirit-possessed boy as a prayer: "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" The Lord did not deny or dismiss the father for saying that. He won't deny or dismiss you either. He will hear and will help in His way, in His time, and for your greatest good. You can believe that without doubt. Amen.