

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
September 16, 2018  
Pentecost 17  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 50:4-9  
Psalm 116  
James 2:1-18  
Mark 9:14-29

Our Gospel lesson today finds Jesus and the disciples again embattled in an argument with the Scribes and religious leaders. Before we analyze the problem, however, we need the context that produces it.

Just prior to this, Jesus has taken Peter, James and John to the Mount of Transfiguration. While they are gone, a man brings his son to Jesus to be healed, but Jesus isn't there. So the man asks the disciples who have remained behind to heal his son.

The disciples try, but fail. When the Scribes, who have come to "check Jesus out" and investigate his activities, see this, they are ready to pounce. They begin to accuse Jesus of being a fraud, and his followers as charlatans.

As our text begins, Jesus returns from the mountain and sees the commotion. He asks, "What's going on?"

The father of the young boy steps forward and tells his story. "I brought my son to you hoping that you might heal him, but you weren't here so I asked your disciples to do it. But they couldn't."

Jesus responds and says: “O unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you?”

Jesus’ words sound harsh here, but in uttering them he has located the problem in this whole situation and placed it front and center. The problem is *unbelief*.

Jesus has been traveling throughout Israel, and in spite of his many signs and miracles, no one has understood who he is. No one, especially the religious leaders, seems to be able to understand that he is *God*, that he is the Messiah. In spite all that he has done, all that seems to result is hardness of heart, suffering, lack of faith, and unbelief.

This unbelief plagues the disciples as well, and as I’ve noted on other occasions, the entire Gospel of Mark is the story of how the disciples struggle to come to faith, to “see” and to “hear” who Jesus really is.

We will explore the disciples’ lack of faith at the end of the text, but in the mean time no one here seems willing to recognize who Jesus is and what he is able to do.

And so, Jesus is gripped by strong feeling and emotion. He is stirred to the depths of his heart, and the stirrings come to him all the way from the Psalms, bursting forth with pain and pathos as he says: “How long?”

“How long do I have to continue to do this and people refuse to see it? How long must I continue to show people who I am, yet suffer rejection? How long must I show people the truth while they stubbornly refuse to get it? When will people realize that I can cure anything but unbelief?”

I think Jesus is serious about this question. But unfortunately he has a little boy in front of him who is racked with violent seizures and unable to speak. He asks the father, “How long has he been like this?”

“Since childhood,” comes the reply. “It has often tried to destroy him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”

Jesus says, “*If I can?* All things are possible to him who believes.”

The man cries out: “I do believe; help my unbelief.”

In uttering those words, he speaks not merely for himself, but also for each of us. For each of us, the problem of unbelief is not as cut and dried as it might first appear. We are often a mixture of both faith and doubt. *It is easy for us to trust Jesus completely in some things, but difficult in others.*

We might easily trust in Jesus for our health, but struggle to trust him with our finances.

We might easily trust in Jesus for our vocation, but have difficulty surrendering our children and trusting our children to his care.

We are often a curious mixture of motives and feelings. We find ourselves saying, “Lord, I do believe, but not fully. I need you to help me overcome my unbelief.” We are like toddlers learning to walk. We love being held by mom or dad, and we don’t want to step out from that embrace.

Further, we find ourselves living in a culture that is exerting great strength to push Jesus to the margin of life. Without realizing it we can sometimes find ourselves saying, “Lord, *if* you can...” This is a sure sign of trouble, for Jesus can cure *anything* -- except unbelief.

The desperate father who brings his boy to Jesus sees something that compels him to grab on to a mustard seed of faith, and to ask Jesus to help him overcome what is lacking. Jesus, full of compassion, heals his young son. *In the midst of small faith, Jesus extends large grace.* In the midst of people still not *getting* who he is, Jesus keeps *giving* who he is away.

After this incident, the disciples ask Jesus, “Why couldn’t we heal this boy? Why couldn’t we cast out this demon?”

Jesus responds, “This kind can only come out by prayer.”

You remember that earlier in Mark’s Gospel Jesus gives authority to the disciples to minister and to heal and to cast out demons, and they actually find themselves doing it. So what happened here?

What we have here is (I believe) a form of *unbelief*, or lack of faith. By that I mean this. The disciples have been traveling around and ministering and healing, and they see amazing things happen.

But think about what might start to happen after a good bit of this. The disciples encounter sick people, and they heal them. They encounter other people with needs, and they meet those needs.

And after awhile, a shift begins to occur in their thinking. They move from thinking, "man, isn't this great?" to "man, aren't *we* great?"

It might be easy for the disciples to get a little full of themselves, to believe that the authority Jesus gave them to do these things is now their personal possession and is within their personal control.

But it is not. The power they have from him is a *dependent* power, even as Jesus' power was dependent upon the Father. The disciples' focus is not one of dependence on Jesus, but on themselves. *They have not learned that faith involves radical dependence on Jesus, which probably explains why they have not prayed. The faith Jesus speaks of here -- the faith that makes all things possible -- is so dependent on Jesus that it constantly looks to Jesus alone as its source.* The disciples have either forgotten this, or they have not yet learned it. Either way, they could not help this little boy and his father.

**Jesus can cure anything but unbelief.** And one of the forms of unbelief that attacks us the most is the temptation to try to rely on our *own* strength and our *own* resources when it comes to sharing in Jesus' work. It can be easy to forget that every need we meet, every person we help, could not be done except for the power of Jesus that is at work in all of us. *Prayer is always the first step in that process.* It is the humble acknowledgement of our *dependence* upon God for all that we do.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, I invite you to come, as I always do -- with *faith*. Did you catch that? With *faith*. Not with confidence in your own ability, your own wisdom, your own righteousness. Come with the humble realization that Christ can do for you what you cannot do for yourself. Come in a spirit of humble dependence.

You don't necessarily need a huge amount of faith to come. You don't have to resolve every struggle or question you have in your life right now. You don't need to solve all the mysteries that confound you in the present moment. All you really need is the willingness to say: *Lord I believe; help my unbelief.*

If that was enough for a hurting father with a terribly ill and broken son, surely it is enough for you and me as well.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.