

Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

“O Lord, Hear My Cry!”

Mark 9:14-29

9/16/18b

In today’s Holy Gospel, from Mark chapter 9, we hear some rather hard-to-hear words from Jesus’ lips—words of deep disappointment because of the unbelief that Jesus encountered in man—including, of all people, in His own disciples.

Today’s reading from Mark 9 follows directly after the Transfiguration, in which Jesus had taken Peter, James, and John up the mountain to reveal His glory and God’s testimony from heaven. After that momentous event Jesus returned to find His other nine disciples locked in a dispute with the religious leaders, a dispute centering on the inability of the disciples to cast out an unclean spirit from a boy. Matthew, Mark, and Luke, these three Gospels, all record the sad and troubled words of Jesus—His exasperation, really—when He hears about this failure on the part of His disciples.

“O faithless generation,” Jesus sighs, “how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you?” (Mark 9:19)

It is as though a long-pent-up flood of frustration bursts out of our Lord’s mouth. He was sent to speak God’s Word and to reveal God’s truth and grace; Jesus came to announce the beginning of the new creation, which He was ushering in...so that all might believe in Him and live. Yet throughout His ministry, what Jesus continually found was resistance to God, hard hearts, and unbelief. He even found it in the men He chose to be His disciples.

Jesus spoke of a “faithless generation”. He was disturbed especially by His disciples. They should have known Him by that time as God’s Son. They should have known His authority over the evil spirits. Encountering this powerful spirit possessing the boy, the disciples

should have cried to the Lord in faith, through prayer placing every confidence in the Lord alone. Their prayers through Jesus the Father would surely have heard, yet the nine lacked the faith in God necessary to rely confidently upon Him for help at such a time as this. Yes, Jesus was disturbed by His disciples. But He spoke in our text of a faithless “generation” because unbelief is what characterized not just the twelve, but the people of that time generally.

The father of the boy showed his own tendency toward faithlessness when he asked Jesus to help “if you can”—not really certain in his mind that Jesus had power to help his son.

Unbelief still marks people today, and it even characterizes us. After church is over, outside the walls of this place, we struggle to be people who live by faith in God. We are baptized into Christ, we have heard the Gospel, we have received the Holy Spirit. We know God’s grace. We are to “be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might,” and nothing should shake our confidence in our God.

Yet adversities of various kinds reveal that we often trust and rely not upon our heavenly Father in faith, but on something else.

Stop and think about God being the almighty Creator of heaven and earth. You’ve probably had the experience of gazing heavenward at the night sky. What a sight, right? Now, Scripture tells us that God made those lights in the sky. So just think about this: Does the One who made those planets and stars (and every other created thing as well) lack power to help those who call upon Him, and does He who sent His very *Son* for us lack the compassion and the will to help His people when they cry? Certainly not!

Our faith has a strong foundation—the risen Christ and the sure promises of God—and yet when faced with the impossible, how our faith in God can become small and frail! Like the father we focus on the enormity of the trouble and timidly ask, “If you can do anything, help.”

How quickly we forget that “with God all things are possible” (Mark 10:27)! Are we weak and overwhelmed by life? Many days! Yet Jesus is strong for us: “My power,” He promises, “is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9) Never, Scripture assures us, will God forsake His people (Heb. 13:5). Yet when push comes to shove and everything is on the line, do we act as if such a promise had never been given to us by our God?

Like the first disciples, we have known the Lord; we know His cross, and His Easter!

We know how Christ conquered death and hell for us; we have walked with Christ in faith.

Yet such is our poor, sinful condition that we often despair of all the things we should be sure of. Yes, we Christians struggle to live by faith.

But, observe further what Jesus is doing in our text.

When the father of the boy uttered his timid words, “If you can do anything...help us,” Jesus wasted not a moment to reply. And the Lord’s reply was given not simply to rebuke a lack of faith, but even more, to reassure a fragile heart and to fortify faith:

“All things,” said Jesus, “are possible for one who believes.” (9:23)

These words of Jesus were Spirit-filled words. They served as a divine promise for this poor man, a God-given Word in which to put his trust at a time when he feared he would lose his son. **The father, let us remember, was face-to-face with a frightening, dark, demonic power. No human strength could resist it. But more importantly, this father was face-to-face with Jesus, Son of God, with whom nothing is impossible and no trouble too terrible to resolve.** At that moment, with deep emotion of his own, the man poured out the words of his heart—weak, desperate words. Honest words, humble words that clung to the promise of Jesus just uttered:

“I believe; help my unbelief!” (9:24)

It almost sounds like a contradiction, doesn't it? I believe, but yet some of me doesn't believe. Friends, do not those words describe us? Believing and yet plagued by doubt? Confident in Christ and yet not always sure? Yet mark this: The Lord does not condemn us for our doubts and uncertainty, as Jesus did not condemn this man. He heard this father's prayer. As requested, Jesus helped this man's unbelief. Such is Christ's mercy that our Lord grants us help when in weak desperation we cry to Him. For this—to be in need and to cry to the Lord—is really the purest, simplest picture of faith.

Mark 9:24, the cry of the father, is a verse of Scripture that brings great consolation to the conflicted, troubled sinner desiring to be a strong Christian but constantly faltering and failing, wanting to believe but constantly feeling the weakness of his or her faith. Article VII of the Formula of Concord, from our Lutheran Confessions, in a discussion of true and worthy guests at the Lord's Table, cites the story of the weak father from our text. We read:

“The true and worthy guests, for whom this precious sacrament above all was instituted and established, are the Christians who are weak in faith, fragile and troubled, who are terrified in their hearts by the immensity and number of their sins and think that they are not worthy of this precious treasure and of the benefits of Christ because of their great impurity, who feel the weakness of their faith and deplore it, and who desire with all their heart to serve God with a stronger, more resolute faith and with purer obedience. As Christ says, ‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest’ [Matt. 11:28], and, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick’ [Matt. 9:12]. ‘God's power is made mighty in the weak’ [2 Cor. 12:9], and Romans 14 [1,3], ‘Welcome those who are weak in faith...for God has welcomed them.’ For ‘whoever believes in the Son of God,’ whether weak or strong in faith, ‘has eternal life’ [John 3:16].

“Moreover, this worthiness consists not in a greater or lesser weakness or strength of faith, but rather in the merit of Christ, which the troubled father

with his weak faith (Mark 9[:24]) possessed, just as did Abraham, Paul, and others who have a resolute, strong faith.” (Formula of Concord, Article VII, Holy Supper, 69-71)

Did you hear that? The worthiness of the guest consists not in the strength or weakness of their faith, but in the merit of Christ. With this assurance, we can cling to Christ and cry to our Lord and come to receive the help that He through His Supper can give and wishes to give to people just like us. Alleluia.

But last of all let us return to our text, to remember how things turned out.

In their versions of this account, Matthew, Mark, and Luke all report the same outcome, that the plea of the father was granted and his son was delivered from the unclean spirit.

Though His weak disciples, faithless that day, failed to trust and to pray, failed to help the boy and his father, yet Jesus did not delay for a moment to help.

For Jesus longs to help His people and to show compassion to them. As wearied and distressed as Jesus was at the poverty of faith and hardness of heart that He encountered in people—even His own disciples—still Jesus continued about His work of love for the world’s salvation.

“[Jesus] rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, ‘Deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him and enter him no more.’ Then the spirit cried out, convulsed him greatly, and came out of him. And he became as one dead, so that many said, ‘He is dead.’ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.” (Mark 9:25-27)

Our mighty Lord Jesus freed that boy from the death grip of Satan and gave him a new life. Jesus showed His power and showed His compassion.

Toward His disciples He also showed His great patience. Though they were not perfect, and were at times, frankly, dismal failures, Jesus continued, immediately after this episode, patiently to teach His disciples, especially to teach them about His upcoming passion, so as to give them a firm foundation upon which to build when the time of His resurrection and the beginning of the Church's mission should come.

And indeed, Jesus did proceed steadfastly to the cross to win grace for sinners. From His mount of Transfiguration He set His sights on the cross—God's plan for Him and for our salvation. Just see how, in this, our Lord showed *His* full and perfect trust in the will of His heavenly Father! Facing a road darker than any we will ever face, Jesus never once faltered in faith or grew weak, but was ever strong to the end, so that in baptismal union with Him, through the power of His death and resurrection, we might become His people of faith.

Still today, dear friends, Jesus is for us the mighty and compassionate helper and deliverer that He was for that desperate father and his pitiful son long ago. Are we in need and troubled by adversity and distress? Do dangers threaten and are we uncertain and fearful of tomorrow? Jesus graciously receives our prayers, prayers sometimes uttered, like that father, in great weakness, as we cry out to God in the name of His only Son. And so day by day we find it true what we have sung about since our childhood: "Little ones (like us) to Him belong. They are weak. But He is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, yes, He loves me; the Bible tells me so!"

O Lord hear my cry! Amen!