

A Lesson on Prayer
Mark 9:30-37
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 12, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, *His disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."*

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

We've said before (just last week) that Jesus' healing miracles always have a deeper theological purpose. Whether these miracles use the healing of physical deafness, muteness, blindness to point to Christ's healing powers over spiritual deafness, muteness, blindness... or even the *temporal* raising to new life pointing to Christ's *everlasting* raising up of those who sleep in faith, they always identify Jesus as the Christ.

The healing recorded in today's text (and the casting out of demons really *is* a healing of sorts, isn't it, showing Jesus' powers over the principalities of darkness)... today's healing likewise points us to the Messiah, but to Christ's teaching on prayer. This is an important lesson for us to learn, for we so often forget the true promises of prayer. We like to talk about the power of prayer, and our text even seems to hint at that, but we misinterpret it, and by so doing easily become disillusioned with prayer and, eventually, give

up on it. So, Jesus teaches... and he teaches us that even prayer depends on the Messiah!

The healing itself really takes a back seat to the conversation surrounding it. A man from the crowd (and the fact that the man is just referred to as “someone” reminds us that no status is needed to come before Christ in prayer) ... this man calls out and explains the commotion: “Teacher, I brought my son to you (and, after explaining the demon, what does the man say?)... so I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able.”

Notice the mistake the man makes in assuming that coming to the disciples of Jesus is the same as coming to Jesus himself. And, when his disciples can’t do anything about his need, he assumes Jesus cannot. Let this be a lesson to us: for though the Office of the Ministry is God’s gift of Christ at work through his bondservants and stewards of His mysteries, we ought not think the pastor is present on behalf of an *absent* Christ, nor that in his essence and person the representative of Christ carries the divine character of Christ and is allowed to wield such divine acts however he wants. That might seem common sense, but think of how often churches today are built around the pastor’s persona rather than on doctrine... how often do people attend as if they put their hopes in what the pastor has for them rather than in what Christ has for them. How many in the last century went to listen to the heterodoxy of Billy Graham or, in our day, the heresy of Joel Osteen, who spoke to them as

representatives of an absent God? But, who needs God when I can appeal to his representative. And, that cult of personality is not new in our day, but even in the first generation of the Church Paul must chastise the Corinthians, “Some of you say, “I am of Cephas, Paul, Apollos” – no, we are all of Christ!”

Yet, we might be tempted to excuse the man’s hopes, as well as the hopes of the parishioner who misunderstands the Office of the Holy Ministry – in simplicity of thought, they know that these men are – if you will – students of, disciples of, even chosen by Jesus. But, what is misunderstood among the people is tragically also misunderstood among the clergy. How often do they assume the right to make decisions for the congregation apart from Scripture and the Confessions? How often do they bear the weight of difficult situations as if it depends on their wisdom/ability rather than on Christ’s? How often do they grow anxious over the life of the congregation, as if its growth or lack thereof depends on their personal charm and not on Christ’s (charismata) Holy Spirit?

And so, in our text, Jesus sighs – either at the man for assuming the disciples stood in for an absent Jesus, or perhaps he sighed at the disciples themselves for assuming an authority that was not theirs to assume. To both, His rhetorical questions apply: “O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?”

That's a loaded couplet of questions! The first reminds us that Jesus is with us, that God is gracious toward our generation in providing His Gospel in all of His various means of grace, but perhaps as a passing rain shower, that will not last forever. The second question reminds us that, just as the day of grace toward the faithless is not eternal, neither is God's withholding of his judgment: "how long shall I bear with you?" The holy Law is not without the holy Judge to rule justly in accord with that Law. God grant us faith to cling to Christ in this day of grace, that He – and not merely those who represent him – would deliver us.

Isn't that what He himself intimates?: "Bring him to me." Jesus himself differentiates between his disciples and himself. Again, hear this correctly: when you go to your pastor, you are right to go! But you do not go to ask "What can *you* do for me?", but to ask, "What can *Christ* do for me?" The pastor is only there to point you to Christ – not a Christ who in absence sends a pastor, but a Christ who there serves you through the earpiece and mouthpiece that is the pastor.

You may not always recognize that, but the spirits do. Just as our text says that the spirit "**saw** [Jesus]," so also in Holy Baptism they **listen** to him: "Depart you unclean spirit and make room for the Holy Spirit," and so also in absolution do they fall silent in accusation against you because of Jesus, just as the pastor proclaims to you: "By

the authority of Christ, I forgive you all your sins.” Who then can accuse what Christ himself has forgiven?

Therefore, we may always with certainty appeal to Christ and to his authority, an authority not only made evident upon the cross, but an authority that itself turned the cross’s shame into glory. An authority that even now gives faith no room for uncertainty. Notice how Jesus responds when the man, in uncertain faith appeals, “If you can do anything, have compassion upon us and help us!” And (this is the closest we perhaps ever come to hearing Jesus snap back in response) – “*If you can!*”

Shouldn’t we poor miserable sinners expect the same response when we come before him with uncertainty? We struggle through the difficulties of current life all around us – Covid, mandates, political infighting, natural disasters, rising foreign powers, health issues of every various sort, marital and family problems, and all of our sins weighing us down – all of it we bring to the altar of God and are so tempted to say, “Lord, *if you can do anything.*” Do we not deserve to have the heavens open in a thunderous boom, “*If you can!*” Or, as he elsewhere says to his disciples, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”

This explains why he concludes this comment with the phrase, “All things are possible for the one who believes.” He doesn’t mean that, “Faith is so strong, you should put your hope in faith because faith itself will move mountains.” Rather, he means, “All

things are possible with Christ, and the one who believes in Christ will not be put to shame – not because Christ will always do every great thing faith wants for life, but Christ will always do every great thing faith needs for life.” And, along the way, he will conform your hearts and minds to be at peace with simply depending upon Him who alone is holy, trustworthy, and to be praised.

Again, this is why Jesus answers the disciples as he does in our text: “Why could we not cast it out?”, they ask. And he responds, “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.” That’s not a questioning of their ability, but a comment for their comfort. Their faith isn’t meant to make them able, and Jesus doesn’t say, “You needed more faith.” Faith is simply taught to pray. In other words, the spirits and evils faith faces can be driven out by God alone, and prayer is the exercise that teaches faith to depend upon God alone. This is true of all our enemies, isn’t it? Certainly, only God can forgive sins, so we know to flee to God alone for forgiveness through his precious means. But it’s also true of all temporal needs. God alone determines his holy will, his good and gracious will, for this creation. He alone has the authority to topple enemies that threaten us, diseases that harm us, disasters that befall us. Your faith cannot stay the winds and waves; your faith cannot heal or prevent diseases; your faith cannot throw down tyrants from their thrones. But Christ can and does, and so faith ought learn to depend solely upon God in Christ. In other words, faith ought learn to pray.

And, notice what we just said, in prayer, faith learns to depend solely upon **God in Christ**. This means, certainty of the value of our prayer lies in the certainty of the relationship between the Father and Son. Isn't that what the prophecy of Isaiah records for us in our Old Testament Reading? That Old Testament reading's words are not the words merely of the prophet, but they are the words of the pre-incarnate Messiah: ["I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting." That's the imagery of the trial and pre-crucifixion shame laid upon the Christ, isn't it? And so, if these are the words of the Messiah, what do they teach us (and how do they comfort us) about the relationship of the Father and the Son and, therefore, the certainty that our prayer will be heard and answered according to God's holy will to overcome all evil and deliver his Church?]

What does the Son say in the Old Testament reading: "The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary." Notice that: the Father gives to the Son the divine Word to sustain the weary ("Come unto me all who are *weary*..."), a tongue that always speaks graciously to the faithful, whom he also *hears* graciously, as he has been given by the Father to do: "He awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught. The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious."

The Messiah has faithfully heard and carried out the Father's will... and the Father's will is gracious toward those who, in faith, fear him and call upon his name in the day of trouble. As certain as Christ did not rebel against the Father's plan to sacrifice him for you, that same Son will now hear your prayer and care for you in accord with the Father's will. Does Jesus himself not promise you, "All that I have heard from my Father, I have made known to you... Whatever you ask the Father *in my name*, he will give it you." And, as the Son's trust in the Father is vindicated, your trust in the Son is vindicated: "He who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me?"

As truly as the Father and Son are one – one in purpose, in holy will, in love toward the Church – equally true is the certainty that the Son who intercedes for you is interceding with a Father who is just as truly *for you*. And, if God is for you, who can be against you?

Thus, as our text reminds us, ours should constantly be a life of prayer... as our Gospel text reminds us, not to show how pious we are, but because in all things, *our help is in the name of the Lord*. How much better off would our world and society now be after 18 months of Covid if we had *first and foremost* fled to God and called upon his name in the day of trouble? Instead, we were focused on the scientists, told to 'follow the science,' and after 18 months of calling upon *them* in the day of trouble – now being *threatened with mandates* to call upon them in the day of trouble – we are still in the day of trouble. When will we learn that such ills that befall us cannot

be driven out by anything but by prayer – not because prayer is powerful, but because the Father who hears our prayer, and the Son who intercedes for us in prayer, and because the Holy Spirit who prays with us in groanings too deep for words – it’s because the prayer is commanded and received by the holy God ... *that’s* why these ills can only be driven out by prayer.

Thus, rather than come to God only because our idolatry of science has proven useless, we may instead be quick to thank God in prayer for daily bread through science, and He will bless its usefulness more than it can advance itself by forcing itself upon you. In prayer, we may boldly call upon Him to end pandemics, to topple the wicked from their thrones, to grant us peaceable daily lives; and He will do all that is in accord with, and conforms our thoughts and hearts to, His holy will. In prayer, we may even ask him to forgive our sins, to protect us from all evil spirits that seek to wrest us from his Church, and He will remember the atoning death of His Son, proclaim to us the peace that surpasses understanding, share with us the risen and glorious body and blood of His perfect sacrificial offering, and safeguard us in the Church by which the Son cares for all who are brought to Him.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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September 12, 2021