

Mark 9:14-29 – *“I believe; help my unbelief!”*

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During this season of Pentecost, we focus on our lives as the body of Christ, the WE of the Church, with Jesus as our head. We have all been chosen to remain in this world mainly for the benefit of others—to confess to others the good news of the eternal life God promises to us as a result of Jesus’ death and resurrection. When we do, we no doubt find ourselves struggling not only with the unbelief of those in the world around us but also with the unbelief within us. This unbelief is at the heart of all our sins. That’s why the focus of today’s sermon is the prayer of the man in our Gospel reading who cried out, *“I believe; help my unbelief!”*

Last Sunday we heard of Jesus’ work in areas outside of Israel, like Tyre and Sidon (modern day Lebanon). When God in Jesus Christ made it clear that He had come to save all people, including us spiritually deaf and tongue tied Gentiles, then it was time to head to Jerusalem to fulfill His work of salvation on the cross.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus was back in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, not far from Nazareth where He grew up. He was with Peter, James and John just after His Transfiguration, and they were meeting up with the rest of the twelve whom they found arguing with some of the scribes. When Jesus asked them what they were arguing about, a man from the crowd spoke up. Evidently he had brought his demon possessed son to be healed by Jesus. But since Jesus wasn’t around at the time, he asked some of Jesus’ disciples to cast out the demon. When they couldn’t, some scribes were quick to notice this weakness of the disciples and were, therefore, trying to discredit them.

Have you ever had that happen to you? Right or wrong, others can be quick to point out our flaws as Christians. And if others don’t, we should! But the good thing about our failures is that they hopefully turn us to God in repentance and faith for forgiveness and help.

It appears that this was something Jesus’ first disciples kept forgetting, that they needed God’s continual help. Since, with God’s help, they had been successful in casting out demons in the past (Mk 6:13), they evidently tried to cast out the demon in this man’s son without praying for God’s help. That’s why, when they later asked Jesus why they couldn’t cast out the demon, Jesus told them that *“this kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.”*

To encourage His disciples and us to pray, Jesus first reminds us of His almighty power as God. Jesus did what no one else was able to do on their own. He cast the demon out of this man’s son—He delivered Him from evil. This naturally encourages us to pray for the Lord’s help during times of trouble, and especially, as in the Lord’s Prayer, to daily pray for God to deliver us from evil.

Then Jesus shows us something else in our text, in addition to the importance of prayer. When Jesus asked the father of this boy how long he had been having these seizures, the father answered, *“from childhood.”* Jesus would have already known the answer to His question, but He asked it for our benefit not His.

Since this boy had been suffering from demon possession since childhood, don’t you think the father (a believer) would have been praying for God’s help since the boy’s childhood, while at the same time seeking God’s help through the physicians and pastors of his day? Yet, his son’s demon possession remained the same, threatening his life. No wonder the father was struggling with unbelief!

When our prayers appear to us to be unanswered, we too may struggle with our faith, asking questions like: How long, O Lord? Why me? Are you listening? Do you care? Such thoughts and questions come not from our faith in God's Word but from unbelief. So we, with the father in our text, cry out, "*I believe; help my unbelief!*"

Let me ask you another question. Had God been answering this man's prayers even before Jesus delivered His son from demon possession? The answer is yes, according to what He knew was best. And the best thing in this situation was best not only for this man and his son but for all of us today and countless others who have heard the words of our text over the centuries.

While God could have delivered this boy and his father from their troubles earlier, He didn't because He planned to use this boy's demon possession to point to Jesus as our Savior not only from the temporary effects of the evil in us and around us, but from their eternal effect, which is death.

Mark, in our text, referred to this eternal effect of Jesus' work when he said that the "*boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, 'He is dead.'* [and he most likely was.] *But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.*" This is resurrection language, and points ahead to Jesus' death and resurrection for our salvation. This good news is what God works through to overcome our unbelief, and to keep us coming to Him in faith and prayer.

By coming to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit today in repentance for our sins of unbelief, and believing that He will forgive us, we are coming first and foremost to the only one who can truly help us with all our troubles. Will He always help us in the way and time we think best? No. First He forgives us. This is certain and immediate, giving us eternal life. Then, whether we are healed physically in this life or not, God works through us as He worked through His Son, to save others through the Good News that even when, through suffering and death, it doesn't look like God is in control, or that He loves us, He does love us and He is in control, working for our eternal salvation. Jesus' resurrection from the dead assures us of that.

All our suffering in this life as children of God points to the suffering, death and resurrection of God's Son, especially when we, during times of trouble, turn to God in prayer, and to His Word and Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper (the certain antidotes for death), leading others to do the same.

[Children's Sermon] When we pray to God for help, we are saying at least two things. First, we are saying that we need help—that we can't solve our problems without God. Second, we're saying that we believe God can help us.

Why do we believe that God can help us from all our problems, even death?...Because Jesus rose from the dead, just as He promised.

Why do we think that God loves us and wants to help us?...Because He tells us in the Bible that He loves the whole world, which includes you!

Do you still have the cross that I gave you last Sunday? Here's another one that you can either keep or give to someone else. This time I've stuck it next to the Good News of John 3:16: "*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.*"

[Let's pray]: Thank you Jesus—for Your loving,—almighty—help and salvation.—Amen.

All glory be to God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.