

Help My Unbelief
Sunday, 16th Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
Isaiah 50:4-10; James 3:1-12; Mark 9:14-29
September 12, 2021

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

Amen.

Last week we learned from the faithfulness of the 'Dog Lady'. Today, we see the faithlessness of the disciples. And, I think, we can identify with both of them.

There are times when we are full of faith... we are FAITHFUL. Everything is right in the world, not because everything is perfect and there are no challenges, but because we know we have a God who can and will help, save, comfort and defend us. We are just like that Syrophenician woman who Jesus, echoing the people around her, called her a dog and stated that she should not take the food from the children. She, as we know, told him that she wasn't after the food, but simply wanted whatever was left over. She just wanted the crumbs.

Jesus praised her. Her faith, knowing that even the crumbs left over from Jesus' work would be enough, impressed Jesus. She trusted Him so much, that she knew there was power in the crumbs.

When we have these times of great faith, it feels as if there is nothing that can stop us. Not the bills, not the cancer, not the stuff on the news... nothing. We know God is in control, we know that He is listening, we know that He cares...

But, then there are times that we are barely hanging on. As you know, it was one year ago that one of the toughest times of my life had begun. Lora and the boys had been gone for six weeks, the world, and we here at the church, were struggling to figure out the

whole COVID response and the 'new normal'. My father-in-law had just passed away, we were planning his funeral. My grandmother was in ICU. We had to give up my boys two puppies, who apparently had killed the neighbors cat. We had to put down one of our beloved cats due to kidney failure. It wouldn't be long before Lora would be hospitalized with COVID, then I would get it, my grandmother would pass away, I would end up in the hospital with COVID, pneumonia and blood clots in my lungs. I would miss my grandmother's funeral, then one month later, in November, we would also bury my grandfather.

Three family deaths, severe family illness, and the loss of three pets... not to mention, I'm still not fully recovered from all of what COVID did to me... trying to continue to provide for my family, do my job as a pastor, grieving, struggling...

I could never fully identify, like I did when I went through all of that, with the father in our reading, "*I believe; help my unbelief*" (Mk. 9:24b).

My prayer through most of that went like this, "Kyrie Eleison. Christe Eleison. Kyrie Eleison." It is the prayer that we sang this morning, "Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy." Over and over and over and over.

It was hard. It still is. I still haven't watched my grandmother's funeral. I don't know that I can.

The poor father in our reading today, is not too unlike the dog lady of last week. Both of them were seeking help for their children. The dog lady for her daughter, this man for his son, both children possessed by evil spirits. I cannot think of anything scarier

for a parent. No control. Helpless. Hopeless. There is nothing in the First-Aid kit or medicine cabinet for that. No doctor can help. Where do you go?

The dog lady went to Jesus, and, was seemingly turned away. This man goes to Jesus' disciples and they can't help. Have you ever been there? Felt rejected by God? Been in a place where it seemed like He, His disciples, His Church, His people couldn't or wouldn't help? Yeah, I bet you have.

Pastors disappoint. They mess up. And, if they haven't, I'll assure you, they will let you down. They are sinful, broken, fallen people.

Christians disappoint. They mess up. And, if they haven't, I'll assure you, they will let you down. They are sinful, broken, fallen people.

The Church disappoints. It is messed up. And, if it hasn't, I'll assure you, it will let you down. It is full of sinful, broken, fallen people.

This should not surprise us. This is why we are commanded to love one another, forgive one another, bear with one another.... Because, we fail one another. Not always because we mean to, but simply because, just like we do with our Heavenly Father, we sin against each other by what we have done, and by what we have left undone... we have not loved our neighbor as ourselves.

The disciples, just like us, failed. Their lack of faith got the better of them. But, isn't that kind of the point?

If you really think about it, the disciples are powerless, the demon possessed boy is powerless, his father is powerless... We, too are powerless.

But, Jesus... Jesus isn't powerless. Even, when He seems powerless, like when He is beaten by Roman soldiers, nailed to a cross, and buried in a tomb... He is not powerless. Early Easter morning, Jesus' body rises from the dead. When He had appeared defeated, He had actually conquered. While on the cross He placed Himself at the mercy of the dreadful three; sin, death and the devil. But, on Easter morning, they were at His mercy and they still are.

My friends, this is what we need to take away from this reading today. That poor father, his poor son, and even those poor disciples were at a loss. They were powerless. The father, no doubt, had done everything within his power and ability to find relief for his son. The disciples, no doubt, wanted to do right by him and to cast out that demon. But..

You and I have had those moments, those days, those weeks, months, or even, years, where we have felt powerless. Perhaps, even on this very day, you are struggling. Your faith is wavering. You are barely hanging on. You cry out with this poor boy's father, "I believe; help my unbelief."

That father admits that his faith is small. "I believe; help my unbelief." He confesses that he doesn't have a faith that is unwavering or standing strong. He admits that he is barely hanging on. He proclaims his helplessness. "Kyrie Eleison. Christe Eleison. Kyrie Eleison." "Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy."

Jesus, at the end of the reading, basically says it isn't the size or power of your faith that matters. But, instead, it is the size and power of WHO you have faith in.

What these disciples, this father, the boy, the bystanders, and we didn't see was where Jesus had just come from. Here we are, with the disciples, and the rest of them at

the bottom of a mountain. But, we did not see where Jesus was coming from as he descended that mountain to stand among them.

Jesus had just stood on the top of that mountain with just three of his disciples; Peter, James and John. But, they weren't the only ones who had been up there. Moses and Elijah also showed up. God, the Father Himself, also showed up. Jesus was transfigured into a radiant brilliance; a captivating bright white. Moses and Elijah point Jesus toward Jerusalem. They point Him toward His death, and from that point on in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus moves toward that Holy city and His triumphant death.

But, Jesus descends the glory of that mountain, and enters, once again, into the fallen chaos of a faithless world. A world where sin, death, and the devil still reigned. And, where a father brings his son to be healed by the disciples... who fail.

And, after failing they ask Jesus, "Why could we not cast it out?" Jesus replied, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."

But, notice again their question, "Why could WE not cast it out?" Notice the object of their faith, "WE". Jesus redirects them, and us, that, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."

It was Jesus reliance and trust in His Father that made the difference. It is your trust and reliance on your Heavenly Father, through His Son, that makes all the difference.

It isn't the size of our faith that saves us. It is the power of the one in whom our faith rests that saves us.

And, so, we like that loving father, like your faltering pastor, like so many whose faith has wavered, take that little bit of that weak and failing faith that we have and we pray. "I believe; help my unbelief." "God, give me strength." "Lord, have mercy."

And your Jesus, who stepped out of heaven to take on our human flesh... Your Jesus, who stepped off that glorious mountain... Your Jesus, who laid down His life that we might live... Your Jesus, who stepped out of the tomb... Your Jesus, who ascended to the Father... That Jesus, your Jesus, steps in to your mess, holds your hand, cries your tears, carries your struggles, mends your broken heart, and gives to you eternity. He bolsters your faith, gives to you hope, brings to you peace, forgives your failings, prepares a place for you and, one day, will call you home to be at peace in His kingdom which has no end.

Now may the peace that passes all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in

Christ Jesus.

Amen.



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