

Mark 9:14-29
Pentecost 17B (Proper 19B)
September 16, 2018
“The Object of Faith”

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

Imagine for a moment that someone asks you to fly around the world on an all-expenses paid journey in their rickety single-engine airplane, what do you say to them? My guess, I hope, would be, “*No thank you.*” The pilot begs you, assuring you, “*It’ll be okay. I’ve been flying this thing for years. It’s never failed. Despite its looks, it’ll make it!*” Again, you say, “*No thank you.*” Shortly thereafter the pilot embarks on his journey. About 35 miles off the coast, the engine fails and the aircraft plummets into the sea. In this example, the pilot had a mountain of faith in his airplane. The problem is, he placed this mountain of faith in a faulty object.

Each day, we display faith in all types of things. For example ... **We don’t usually check out the chairs** we sit in ... we expect to sit and the chair will hold us up. **We don’t usually hope the keys** we put in our doors will work ... we put them in and expect they’ll open the door. **We see a green light** ... we expect the other lanes will get a red light telling them to stop so we can proceed safely along. We generally don’t say, “*If only I had more faith in chairs, keys, green and red traffic lights.*” Famous Bible scholar and pastor Stuart Briscoe once said, “*Faith is only as valid as its object. You could have a tremendous amount of faith in very thin ice ... and drown. You could have very little faith in very thick ice and be perfectly safe.*”

In our gospel today, we see Jesus, accompanied by Peter, James and John as they descend from one of the ultimate mountaintop experiences ... the Transfiguration of Jesus. Peter, James, and John see the glory of God revealed in Jesus as His Father says, **(Mark 9:7)** “*This is my beloved Son; listen to Him.*” It’s from this experience, first-hand, face-to-face time with God Himself, that Jesus and the Three enter into the on-going story today.

The other nine disciples, left behind to continue their work are in a what I visualize as a good old-fashioned playground dispute. The disciples and the scribes are going at it. Why? Well, it seems the disciples tried to exorcize a demon from a boy and failed. The scribes were rubbing it in and the disciples were trying to defend themselves. All the while the crowd looks on enjoying the altercation.

It's at this point that we encounter the man whose only son is possessed by a horrible demon. The demon takes over the son at any time and causes him great damage as he takes control of the boy's body ... causing him to go rigid, foam at the mouth, even to throw himself in fire and water. The father is desperate!

The father has heard about the things Jesus and His disciples have done. He has faith in them, thinking they might be able to heal his son. The disciples after all have in fact done this kind of thing before. Jesus had sent them out (Mark 6:7) "*two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.*" And the disciples went out ... having faith in Jesus promise to them. When disciples returned they reported how (Mark 6:13) "*they cast out many demons ...*" But, this time they weren't able to.

Jesus recognizes the father's faith and takes the boy to Himself. He commands the spirit saying, (Mark 9:25) "*You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.*" And immediately the spirit caused the boy to scream and convulse as it obeyed Jesus, the Lord of Creation, and left the boy. And Jesus raised the seemingly dead boy to new life. But, as with last week's miracle healing of the deaf-mute man ... the point of the account we hear isn't that Jesus healed yet another person ... there is a much larger point to be made ... Jesus is teaching His disciples ... and you and me about faith. What we put our faith in ... and how we exercise that faith in our lives.

And the teaching began when the disciples, in private with Jesus, wondered aloud what happened ... they thought they had authority over spirits like this. Jesus told them, (Mark 9:29) *“This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.”* Jesus’ main point emerges ... faith and prayer ... they go together in the life of Jesus’ disciples ...

But this mysterious thing called faith can be a problem for many of us ... especially when things in life are going poorly. Sometimes Christians, like many other people in the world have faith in ... faith. They have faith in their own abilities, their world’s abilities. And when that fails ... faith in fate ... what will be will be.

On the other hand, some Christians worry their faith is too small or inadequate for the situation at hand. They see failure at God’s calling to them as evidence that their faith is too small ... or worse, non-existent. So they determine they need to build up their faith so they can do what God promises. Until they can build that faith up strong, they shrink away from doing God’s work in the world.

We all sometimes, demonstrate our “faith” in these ways. But there’s a problem with both of these approaches to faith. They don’t square with God’s Word. God’s Word doesn’t advocate having larger and larger faith ... it doesn’t advocate putting faith in self or world. Jesus puts it quite simply saying, (Mark 11:22) *“Have faith ... in God.”* The key isn’t how much faith you have ... it’s the primary object of your faith. What do you have the utmost of faith in? Faith in yourself ... in the world around you ... or faith in God and His Word and promises.

When a crisis rears its ugly head in your life. What is your first reaction? Martin Luther says words to this effect, *“That to which we turn to, that is the object of our faith ... that is our God.”* Do you turn to your own abilities and means? Do you turn to your friends? Do you turn to the paid professional you found on the internet? Who do you turn to in your crisis?

Certainly, there are crises and problems I can solve myself ... I can plunge my own toilet. I can get rid of a headache with some Tylenol or Motrin. I can fix a flat tire and change out the brakes on my car. I can even offer up some good advice on investments and retirement. But, when I think about these things, I know I'm able to do these things because God has blessed me with knowledge, skills, and abilities to handle them. But sometimes I find myself up against something I can't handle ... even with the gifts God has given me. Then what do I do? That's the question the disciples had ... "*Jesus, why couldn't we get rid of that demon? We've done it before...*" Jesus responds, (Mark 9:29) "*This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.*"

Prayer and faith, they go hand in hand. In the midst of a crisis, we come to our wits end. We've used the gifts God has blessed us with, yet still, Satan and his relentless evil spirits are bearing down us ... with no relief in sight. What to do? Some, like the disciples simply give up and wonder why they couldn't ... Some, turn to others for help. Jesus tells the disciples and us, that in these times we turn in faith to the one outside of ourselves who we believe will help us, or those around us in need. We turn to our Father in prayer.

Even Jesus had moments He was faced with unspeakable evil. For example, after celebrating His last Passover Meal with His disciples, He felt the incredible weight of all mankind's sins bearing down on Him. He did what He taught the disciples and all of us to do in the face of such turmoil. He went to His Father in prayer saying, (Mark 14:36) "*Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.*" His Father, out of pure grace and mercy for you and me, gave His only Son the strength and courage to withstand a night of pure wickedness followed by a day of unadulterated evil as He suffered and died on the Cross for all of us. The gospels all confirm how creation convulsed as Christ defeated evil's death grip over it – it slipped into darkness, the earth shook breaking open tombs, and the temple curtain split in two from top to bottom. Evil's complete reign over creation was

overthrown by His prayer. And three days later, Jesus was raised to new life as He rose from the dead ... defeating forever the effects of sin and death for all who believe.

The disciples and us ... we have power over evil when we trust God and His Word and promises to us first above all things. Prayer ... it's the ultimate sign of trust. Jesus teaches us, **(Mark 9:29)** *"This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."* When we finally realize that we're powerless ... we turn to the object of our faith, the one and only person we can truly trust. God our Father. Prayer ... it's the ultimate sign of obedience to the First Commandment ... Luther writes in the Small Catechism, *"The First Commandment is 'You shall have no other Gods.' What does this mean? You shall fear, love, and trust God above all things."* And who is God? We confess our belief in the object of our faith in the words of the Creeds ... the one true God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And we put our trust in the one true God alone when we pray to Him ... knowing that it's only through Him that we receive anything.

And He gives us everything we truly need ... **He gives us forgiveness of our sins**, which separate us from Him forever. **He gives us all that we need to live the life He has called** us to live in His creation. **He gives us the means to be His gifts** to others in need.

When we pray, we give up on ourselves and the world. We put our trust in God alone. That is faith. Faith in the only one who can save us from sin and death. Faith in the only one who can bring us to new life, both now, and in eternity. The size, strength, or amount of faith matters not. Any amount of faith, generated by the Holy Spirit, in God our Father's love shown for us by the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of His Son Jesus, is sufficient to do His will in the world, to save us, and to bring us into eternal life with Him.

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

James Kent