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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado  
Pentecost 17 (Proper 19B), Series B  
Saturday, September 15, 2018  
Sunday, September 16, 2018

Sermon: “Help My Unbelief!”<sup>1</sup>

Text: Mark 9:14-29

Focus: Jesus’ mercy overcomes our doubts.

Function: That their faith would be strengthened through Jesus’ Word and acts of mercy.

Structure: Story-Applied

Locus: “We pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice...” (SC, 6<sup>th</sup> Petition of the Lord’s Prayer).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. It was an act of hopeful desperation—almost a matter of last resort, and yet of prime importance. The father brought the boy to see if Jesus could heal him. Only, Jesus was nowhere to be found. He was gone!

The conversation may have gone something like this: *Where do you say he went? Up on the mountain somewhere? No, no one knows what he’s doing there. He just got up one morning with Peter, James, and John, and off they went! When will they be back? No one can say, really.*

And so the father stood there with his son dangling in his arms, staring askance at Jesus’ remaining nine disciples. From Luke’s Gospel, we know the boy was his “only child,” his only son (Luke 9:38, ESV).<sup>2</sup> He couldn’t bear the thought of going back home with nothing to show for it. How could he face his wife, having done nothing for his son?

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revision of a sermon originally preached on September 16, 2012, at Epiphany Lutheran Church of Castle Rock, Colorado.

<sup>2</sup> All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

The demon that dominated his son's little body made him deaf and dumb. The boy couldn't speak or cry out in pain. He couldn't pray. Nor could he hear his father's prayers repeated endlessly through sleepless nights. He never knew the sound of his mother's voice singing lullabies softly in his ear. And when the fits seized him, burning his face impossibly red, his cries of terror were terrible—and silent. Someday it would be the death of him.

Was there really nothing to be done?

By this time a crowd of the usual suspects was gathering: religious gawkers, Jesus' groupies, and the ever-hostile scribes. Everyone waited to see what Jesus' disciples would do.

We can imagine the disciples eyeing the boy nervously and exchanging knowing nods with one another. *Yes*, they must have fretted, *something needed to be done*. Yes, Jesus had given them authority over evil spirits (Mark 3:14-15; 6:7). And they had already enjoyed a little success as itinerant exorcists, driving out demons in Jesus' name (Mark 6:13, 30).

So they agreed to take on the boy's case. But it wasn't easy. In fact, it seemed impossible. No matter how hard they tried, no matter what they said, or how many times they waved their hands in the air, nothing happened, except that the boy began to spasm and seize and foam at the mouth—just as the father described.

The scribes must have smiled wryly and nodded in self-righteous satisfaction as the disciples hemmed and hawed, and the father's heart sank into his stomach. He despaired. He gathered his son and got ready to go when suddenly Jesus showed up!

The crowd parted and gave way. "What are you arguing about?" Jesus asked.

The poor father piped up—and didn't bother about watching his tone. "Teacher, I brought my son to you." Implication? *But you weren't here!* "So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able."

And it's hard to say—I can't really be sure—but I think it was more sorrow than anger in Jesus' voice when he turned to the boy's father, to his disciples, and yes, even to the scribes, and said, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?" No wonder that some translations of the Bible describe God's character as "long-suffering." "How long?" is the refrain of many of the complaint Psalms (e.g., Pss. 6, 13, 74, etc.). Normally, people complain that they are fed up with God. We forget the incredible amount of patience that God daily demonstrates towards us.

Jesus said, "Bring me the boy."

So they brought him to Jesus, and almost on cue, he started to convulse. Like a good doctor, Jesus asked for the boy's history. "How long has this been going on?"

The father answered: "From childhood!" As long as the father could remember, his son had been sick and possessed of unspeakable horror. With chilling consistency, the demon tried to kill his son by throwing him into fire and water—his entire life!

The father pleaded, "If you can do anything, have compassion on us and *help* us."

"If you *can!*" Jesus quipped. "All things are possible for one who believes."

Jesus' statement smarted on the father's ears. It was a rebuke. And yes, it hurt. How dare Jesus upbraid a person in his situation with everything he felt, all that he was going through!

But Jesus' words were also a ray of hope and a way out. "All things are possible for one who believes." Yes, Jesus was in the business of doing the impossible. He made miracles happen! And even now, at the proverbial end of the rope, maybe, just maybe, something could still be done for his son.

That's when the father cried out, "I believe; help my *unbelief!*" (Some ancient manuscripts add that he burst into tears.) In any case, this was the father's prayer: *Lord, I want*

*to believe! I really do! I know you can do miracles. But I just can't see it right now. Sometimes the devil seems too strong, and I am just too weak. I don't know what to think anymore. I'm full of so many doubts. I want to believe, so help my unbelief!*

And you know what? Jesus did! He gave faith to the doubting father and took away the disbelief of the disciples. Jesus commanded the demon to come out, and out it came! Of course, it made a scene on its exit. After it rattled the boy to within his last breath, everyone worried he was dead. But the boy survived, albeit a bit shaken. Jesus helped him up by the hand gave him back to his father, fully healed. The boy had a new life—and his father had renewed faith. At last the boy was whole and free to speak and laugh and cry and sing and thrill to the sound of the birds and wind and his mother's song—and his father's prayers. For, as Jesus says, "All things are possible for one who believes" (Mark 9:23).

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And so with the mute boy's father, we too cry out, "Lord, I believe! Help *my* unbelief!"

Dear friends, do you ever struggle to believe? Maybe, like the father, life has beaten it out of you. Or, like his son, you have gone through fire and water (Ps. 66:12). We have been to the School of Hard Knocks, only to be kicked again and again while we're down. (And some of us look it too!) Do you have any faith left, even an ounce, even as much as a grain of mustard seed?

As you face unemployment or mounting credit card bills, do you ever doubt that God really supplies your daily bread? As you continue to watch your loved one suffer from terrible pain or a debilitating illness, do you wonder if God is strong enough to heal their body? When your relationships lie in ruin, do you question if God can really heal your broken heart and bring about reconciliation with the people who hurt you—and the people you've hurt? In the midst of

your guilt and shame, do you doubt that God loves you and can really forgive a terrible sinner like you, or like me?

We all worry, wonder, and wait. Is God really good? Can he be trusted? Will he come through in the end? Will he show up? Does he love me? Will he forgive me? Does any of this God-stuff, the spiritual life, really matter?

I must admit that often I feel as if I have more in common with the doubters than with those full of self-sure certainty. As a Christian caregiver, I am witness to so much hurt and heartache that I often wonder, “What are you doing here, God?” “Are you really there?” “Do you really care?” Like nine disciples in our Gospel lesson, I haven’t been able to cast out every demon that crosses my path. And I’ve had to face my own demons too.

Faith is never easy. But it’s what we need more than anything in our broken world. So we turn our eyes to heaven, shake our fists in prayer, and beg, “God, *if* you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us”? *If!* “If you can...” What a helpless prayer! What a seemingly hopeless place to be! We echo the heart-felt cry of the mute boy’s father, the refrain of all the fair-weather faithful: “Lord, I believe. Help *my* unbelief!”

And you know what? He does! In the midst of your doubt and despair, Jesus speaks a Word of blessing and promise. He gives you a message of healing and hope. He points to the cross on which he died to prove his love for you. He rises from the dead as a sign of the future hope of a life free from suffering. He promises that he loves you and will never forsake you (Heb. 13:5). You are not alone. And there is *always* hope.

“I am with you always...,” Jesus says, “even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). So he opens your ears and opens your heart. He loosens your lips and unleashes your tongue! No

longer spiritually deaf and dumb, we are made whole and free! “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise” (Ps. 51:15).

The father in our Gospel lesson despaired over the suffering of his “only child,” his only-begotten son. But God loves you so much that he sent *his* only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to die for you, so that if you believe in him, you won’t perish, you won’t suffer and sigh forever, but instead inherit eternal life (John 3:16). As the Apostle Paul writes, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32). Won’t a good God like that answer your prayers and increase your faith? Yes, he will!

When I remember the cross of Christ and look to the hill of Golgotha, where Jesus gave his life and shed his blood for us, when I see Jesus on the cross for me, then I am reassured that God is good and gracious, loving and full of mercy.

And so we pray, “Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief!” In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.