

I Believe, Help My Unbelief
Mark 9: 14 – 29

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The scripture we read today follows the transfiguration, that moment when God speaks about Jesus to John, James, and Peter on top of the mountain. God says, “Behold this is my Son with whom I’m well pleased, listen to him,” *And suddenly looking around they no longer saw any one with them but Jesus only.* Together they head down the mountain all aglow.

Meanwhile, the disciples who were left at the base of the mountain are surrounded by scribes and have entered into some sort of argument. The crowd presses in to listen, daring the disciples to show their strength. A father’s deepest desire, for his son to be made well, is left unfulfilled. The disciples try to explain why it is they can’t heal him, why the power Jesus gave them doesn’t work, why God allows demons to take hold of people, why God doesn’t seem to care about this boy.

Our story opens when the two, those who were at the mountaintop and those who stayed on the ground below, meet.

I don’t think it is difficult for us, mortals, to believe in God, to believe God created this world and us. The Grand Canyon, the stars in the sky on a clear night, the light of the full moon upon the foam of an ocean wave all testify to a grand creator in whose world we stand. On a mountaintop at sunset all seems right and holy. God is so ever near. “I’ll never forget this time” Angela said to me as we walked down the hill, she limping from a cut in her leg she had gotten when she scrambled up a rock for a better view. The pain didn’t matter to her, for that evening I had taken the confirmation class on a hike that led us above the fog and we had sat upon a sea of clouds.

What is difficult is to believe God still cares, when we are faced with that which isn’t beautiful...when we look at images of poverty or war or disease. People reason, if what is isn’t good, then the creator has failed. God is not to be believed or trusted. When we come down the mountain we enter the plain of human woe and doubt.

Re-entry we call it here at Community Church because we all know it doesn't take our seeing horrific images to shake off the touched by Jesus glow of a retreat. All it takes is a crying child or an unhappy spouse or a sink full of last night's dishes to make us wonder if anyone really cares!

There is a difference in our story. The disciples at the bottom of the mountain weren't just coming home to daily chores. In fact, they were left behind. They never did get to on the retreat. They were doing the work Jesus had sent them to do and they were failing. They couldn't cast out the demon. It had worked before, earlier when Jesus sent them out to cast out spirits. Why not now?

At the end of the scripture, Jesus speaks as directly as Jesus ever does..."This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer." Aha!...we say, the disciples didn't succeed because Jesus hadn't taught them to pray yet.

That seems a little too tidy for me. It doesn't address Jesus' anger. If he hadn't given them what they needed to help them handle life at the base of the mountain, wouldn't he have felt a little bad, just a little sorry? Further, if prayer was the point, wouldn't have Mark chosen the next narrative, written it in a way that it also focused on prayer? Finally, if prayer was what was needed, then why could they cast out spirits earlier in scripture when they also hadn't yet learned how to pray.

No prayer isn't at the center of this particular scripture...Jesus is.

A story is told of a woman named Judy who was frustrated by her busy husband Bill not fixing the lawn mower that broke the previous weekend. The lawn was getting a little longer. Bill was off in the garage diddling around. At least that's what Judy, the loving wife, thought when decided to go outside with scissors in her hand thinking, surely this will get his attention. It was warm outside when she bent over with her scissors and started cutting the grass. After a little while Bill, who was proud of his finished fixed up computer in the garage, came into the kitchen and looked out the window. He saw his wife with scissors bent over, looking a little tired. He asked, "What are you doing?" Judy said, what does it look like I'm doing? I'm cutting the grass, she replied. She didn't think she needed to say any more. Well, then, Bill said, "wait there just a minute." A few minutes later, he opened the sliding door and walked out to his wife. He

waited until she had finished cutting the last of the second row she had done...a 12 inch line of cut grass could be seen...a foot in a lawn that was 30 feet long and 20 feet wide. Judy stood up and stretched her back. Finally, she looked squarely into his eyes and he into hers, and he said...“This should help you with the edging” and handed her a pair of nail clippers.

Like Judy, those who were left behind that day, who weren't invited to the mountaintop, chose to do that which could only fail. They were angry with Jesus. He wasn't there for them.

They wanted to hear Jesus say “yes” I care about you. Yes, you do have the power to fight this battle. Yes I am with you. Instead they are waylaid by the arguments of the scribes who are glad to hand them a set of nail clippers.

The scribes will use any excuse they can to take hold of us, to get into our heads, that we might try to describe, inscribe, prescribe the ways of God. When I was a newer minister, I smiled at the wisdom of the phrase, “prayers are heard even when the end isn't what you want it to be,” and then stumbled through my next prayer for healing...in the end, Lord, not my will, but your will be done.

I didn't want to make God less than God....

You see, if you ask and it doesn't happen, then God isn't the powerful one we know God to be.

If you ask, you are testing God, making God jump through a hoop of your own choosing.

If you ask, you are letting God down, not being faithful to his will, his purpose.

It's not proper to believe you can ask for anything, hope for miracles, the scribes tell us. The demons of this world are much too strong. Jesus is away. You don't have the ability to fight against that which is truly unholy. So learn to live a life of purity, protect yourself from that which may infect you, stop wandering around with this crowd but live apart where

you can be safe. Then, apart from all this noise, you will be able to hear God.

Clip, clip, clip.

Into the midst of this discussion, Jesus comes.

“When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him.” The scribes sink back into the earth.

What are you arguing about with them?, Jesus asks.

No one wants to admit to Jesus that they just might have been arguing about what God can and cannot do. No one wants to speak their frustration that the very moment they needed him he was gone and they assumed he didn't care anymore. They didn't want to confess they had tried to get along without him.

Teacher, I brought you my son...

The father explains what happened. I had asked your disciples, since you weren't here, to cast out the spirit but they failed.

Jesus looks around at all those who are silent. He knows. He is angry. “You faithless generation, how much longer must I bear with you?...you who would let the scribes argue with you about what God can or cannot do...you who expect me to stay on a mountaintop rather than walk with you...you who think that because a spirit holds tight to a soul that I don't care about him, that God doesn't care about him...that God's love, your father's love, means nothing.

Then to the father, “bring him here to me.”

“When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth.”

The bad spirits always recognize Jesus in Mark's gospel. They don't doubt his power over them. They don't doubt that Jesus cares to free people from them.

The father, though, isn't an evil spirit. Like us, when we are in the midst of trouble, all we see is that trouble. The father looks upon his son's convulsing, not as a sign of the spirit's recognition of Jesus' power, but rather yet another episode of that which has plagued his son from childhood. "It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him. But, if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us."

"If you are able, all things can be done for the one who believes."

Way back in high school, I played on the school's basketball team. The coach was teaching what I thought was an offensive play. I was on the second squad, playing defense. I presumed that the play was meant to defeat us. But the ball got close enough to me that I couldn't help but poke it away. They tried the play several times and each time I was pretty pleased with myself for disrupting the play. Finally, the coach stopped us and said, "Heather, you are supposed to steal the ball." All right then, I said to myself, the next ball is mine...and it was.

"If you are able? All things can be done for the one who believes."

Okay, then, "I believe...I believe...oh, Lord, help my unbelief!"

You see God means for us to win.

Have I committed a foul? Have I gone over the top?

Only if winning means not dying.

Funny how the boy appears to be dead when the spirit leaves him. Doesn't stop Jesus. He takes the boy by the hand...and he arose.

Will we choose to be satisfied with just poking away the ball believing that is all we are meant to do...or will we trust that the one who loves us will come by our side and give us what we need to win the battles over the other spirits. Will we go out there alone or will we invite Jesus into our lives?

Jesus who believed in God, who believed in us, all the way to the cross and into the grave. The one who rose. The one who says to us...all things are possible for the one who believes.

Jesus-- This is my beloved son; listen to him.

You don't need to be on a mountaintop. He is reaching out for you today.

So in our prayer time...let Jesus be the one you see...

Perhaps he comes to you as teacher...there's something he wants you to understand...

Perhaps today he comes to you as a healer...there's something inside you that must be carved out, let to die, that you might stand tall again...

Perhaps today Jesus comes to you as your master...wanting you to let go of the arguments, the noise, and hear simply his words...all things are possible....