

### **Mark 9:14-29**

<sup>14</sup>When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. <sup>15</sup>When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. <sup>16</sup>He asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" <sup>17</sup>Someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; <sup>18</sup>and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so." <sup>19</sup>He answered them, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me." <sup>20</sup>And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. <sup>21</sup>Jesus asked the father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. <sup>22</sup>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." <sup>23</sup>Jesus said to him, "If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes." <sup>24</sup>Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" <sup>25</sup>When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!" <sup>26</sup>After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." <sup>27</sup>But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. <sup>28</sup>When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" <sup>29</sup>He said to them, "This kind can come out only through prayer."

### **Sermon:**

To understand our reading from Mark this morning it will help to put it in context. It's important to know that as Jesus enters into this chaotic scene of the disciples arguing with the scribes that he is returning from his transfiguration.

The transfiguration, of course, was the event in which Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a mountain. On the mountain Jesus changed – his face radiated light, his robes were so white and bright that the disciples could not look at him. While this dramatic scene was unfolding, Moses and Elijah appeared. The lawgiver and the prophet. Peter tried to freeze the moment, to build shelters for them so they could stay on the mountaintop forever, but Jesus knew it was time to return. The mountaintop was spectacular, but he was needed down below.

Jesus laid aside his robe of glory and came back down the mountain to seek out his family, his disciples, and to see what they are up to. Christ's glory above does not make him forget the concerns of his church below. This is an entire lesson in itself, but this morning it is only the preamble.

Christ's return down the mountain is similar in many ways to Moses' trip down the mountain. Upon reaching the bottom, both were confronted with scenes of chaos – of things gone terribly wrong in their absence. Moses descended to find God's people worshiping an idol and preparing a feast for it. Jesus returned to find his disciples arguing with a group of scribes over a small boy and his father, while a crowd surrounded them, adding fuel to the fire, as crowds generally do.

Into this bedlam strides Jesus and his three lieutenants, and the whole scene changes. Where before there were two sides arguing with the crowd egging them on, suddenly all of them stopped, together they were overcome with awe, and together they ran toward Jesus. No longer were there two sides – at the sight of Jesus all divisions were abandoned by the force of his presence.

We remember that when Moses came down from his mountaintop encounter with God, and after each meeting with God afterwards, Moses' face glowed. He used to wear a veil so as not to freak the people out. And Jesus, while he was on the mountaintop was also glowing – radiant. I suspect that as he returned from this experience into the midst of this argument he was still shining. Obviously, there was something significant about his appearance that caused both those who loved him and those who were opposed to him to fall silent in awe. There was something strongly heavenly about this man that quieted the crowd.

Once they were calm, Jesus asked 'What's going on here? What is this arguing about?' The father of the boy replied 'I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down;

and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but *they could not do so...* if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.'

In Matthew 8 we read about another time when Jesus came down off a mountain and a leper approached him saying 'If you are willing, Lord, make me clean.' 'If you are willing.' But this father says 'if you are able.' The leper was confident in Christ's ability, but was unsure if Christ would want to heal him. This father, however, questions Jesus' ability to heal his son.

This is, of course, because those who were acting in the name of Christ - the disciples - were unable to cast this demon out. They tried, and they failed.

Part of the reason they failed may be that this spirit had had possession of the boy from the time he was a child, and that this length of time strengthened and confirmed its hold on him. When vicious habits are rooted by long usage, when chronic diseases settle in it is no small matter to root them out. The disciples, and we as disciples, should not think that our ministry is always done with ease; some things will take more effort and perseverance than others.

In this case Jesus told his disciples that they needed to prepare themselves in prayer if they hoped to cast this spirit out. To overcome any strong challenge, preparation and training is required. In retrospect this is a no brainer, but something we need to be reminded of more frequently than one would think necessary.

There is a side lesson here, which is terribly important, though not in the scope of this sermon is that this failure due to a lack of preparation results in Jesus' honor being impugned. While Jesus remains all powerful, our careless actions have the ability to besmirch his good name. In my years as a Christian I've found that almost every argument against Christ that the world throws at us is really a criticism of the church and of how Christians live.

In this case, the disciples careless promises and lack of preparation end up not only harming Jesus' honor, but it actually results in the diminishing of the father's faith. The disciples have become a stumbling block. This is revealed in the father's question 'if you are able, heal my son.'

Imagine being the father: 'Jesus, I did believe. I heard about you, I heard about your ministry, I heard about the miracles, I heard about your compassion. And so I brought my son to you. We travelled for days, at times I had to carry him - rigid as a board - as the spirit would not let him go. I did all this because I believed, because I held onto hope.'

'When I got here you were gone, but these men said they were friends of yours. They said they were acting in your name and with your power. But they could do nothing. They don't seem to have any power at all. Do you? Do you have any power? Can you do the things they say? Can you heal my son?'

Maybe it was the residual glow on Jesus face, maybe it was just the force of his presence, but when Jesus looked at the father and said 'All things can be done for the one who believes,' something leapt in this man's chest and immediately he cried out 'I do believe; help my unbelief!'

This declaration and prayer is poignant and beautiful - most of all it is honest. Lord I believe, help my unbelief! This is the prayer of all of us, whether we are battle hardened prayer warriors or if we are approaching Christ for the first time.

This father had arrived a believer, but his belief had been shaken by the disciples' failure. His confidence has dried up, but he still wants to believe, and so he says 'Lord, help my unbelief.' If we read the subtext we can see what the man is really saying. 'You know what would really help my unbelief right now Jesus? Do you know the only thing that will help my unbelief? A miracle. Heal my son.' It is the lack of healing that has caused the unbelief, only a healing can restore that belief.

There is a great similarity between the journey of this man in the text, and our sacrament this morning. It's a similar journey of faith and hope. In this morning's baptism we have with us a man who has heard of Jesus, and has travelled far to meet him. I don't want to put words in Gary's mouth, but my own baptism was not too long ago and I remember the journey well.

Like the father in the story I had heard of Jesus' ability to heal, and so I came. Some of the disciples I met put me off a little, they made me question the truth of what I had heard; but I came, and I came to Jesus with the same questions as this father. 'Can you really do the things they say?'

The questions of new believers are often much the same. 'Can you really give me a new life? A new beginning? A new hope? Are you truly the son of God? Can you really forgive sin? Can you set me free from guilt so that I no longer live under the shadow of yesterday? Jesus, if you are able, heal me. I came because I believed; help my unbelief. Show me my miracle.'

I fully expect a miracle this morning; I've seen it already unfolding as Gary and I have spent time together in the past while. Together we are going to witness a new life, a new birth. 'See, I am doing a new thing, says the Lord, do you not see it?' Gary is going to be transfigured before our very eyes. Say goodbye to what was, and prepare to welcome what now is.

As we enter into this baptism we hold fast to the words of Jesus: 'I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high. John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'

This Holy Spirit that the disciples were waiting for is the same Holy Spirit that descended on Jesus and empowered his ministry, and is the very same Spirit that we call upon to grace Gary this morning.

'The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.'

Lord, we believe. It may be as small as a mustard seed, but we believe. Help our unbelief. Give us our miracle. Give us our healing. In the strong name of Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith we pray. Amen.