

The Heart of Faith

Mark 9:14-29

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It is one of those passages, of course, that remind us of the humanness of the disciples, the cluelessness of the disciples. But in many ways, we can relate to them and to their mindset. It is an opportunity for us to enter into what is a relatively straightforward narrative, but also that it might expose in us a very simple need—what is at the heart of faith. And that is to trust the Lord Jesus.

Hear now God's Word, Mark 9:14-29.

And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him. And he asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" And someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able." And he answered them, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me." And they brought the boy to him. And when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth.

And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." And Jesus said to him, "'If you can'! All things are possible for one who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!"

And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." And 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." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer." [ESV]

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Pray with me.

Father, please expose to us the heart of faith. And may you enable us by your Holy Spirit to cry out, "We believe, but help us in our unbelief." Expose to us how often we feel and act more like the disciples than we do this father. And yet, in this father's crying, help us to see the heart of faith. Help us in our unbelief. Help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

This passage I want you to see, as we first look at verses 14 to 19, the powerlessness of the disciples. Verses 23 and 24, I want you to see how this father has an understanding of his limits. And in verses 25 to 29, how what is being called for is radical reliance. For all who can hear and for all of us sitting here this morning—powerlessness, understanding limits, and radical reliance.

And so this morning as we go to the Lord's Supper, my point was to be as spare as I possibly can as a pastor and preacher. That's hard for me, because I usually have a great economy of words. Mary Erickson, who types up the transcripts, will tell you. So this morning, I don't want to spend a lot of words, because I believe the narrative simply teaches itself. And so I want the power of Scripture to be front and center, and I want to get out of the way—as an expression of my trust in the Holy Spirit and in the Word.

Powerlessness. They were arguing. You can imagine for just a moment the fact that the disciples had already seen success. They'd already been gifted. They'd already been sent out by Jesus. They were told what to do, and they had gone out and were teaching. And they were doing acts of healing. And they clearly had been given the gifts from Jesus. But now, Jesus, as he arrives, as he comes back to them—they're arguing. They're arguing with religious leaders who were trying to confront them, "Do you belong to this one, Jesus?" The crowd had gathered around them. They were in this.

Now, what were they arguing about? Well, for one, a father had come and asked for help. They couldn't get the job done. And so now there is a debate. Who is Jesus? Who are you? What are you doing? Clearly you can't do what you say you can do. They were confronted with their powerlessness. What they're being confronted with is that prior success. The evidence of power in the past cannot be presumed as being present in the present or in the future. Because the power is not something that can simply be acted upon in our own strength. The disciples, if you will, had an understanding and experienced prior success. They thought they had what they needed. The question at the end of the text evidences this.

They simply ask, verse 28, "Why could we not cast it out?" Now, there's power in pronouns. The pronoun that they use here demonstrates their powerlessness. What do they ask? "Why could we not do this?" Built into that question is demonstrating and exposing their powerlessness—we thought we had what we needed. Didn't you already give us that? Didn't you already tell us that this is what we were supposed to do? Why couldn't we do it? Even at the end of the passage, after they saw Jesus do these things, they still don't get it.

And you've heard us say this before—this is one of the geniuses of the Gospel of Mark. He's trying to draw us again and again to the sharp point, the acute reality, that even the disciples who had walked with Jesus, saw what he did, learned what he taught, still, it seems, do not get it. And here, that is the case. Even here, they do not see where their true power comes from and how that exposes their powerlessness. They simply want to think that if they go to the gas station enough and they get what they need, they can simply go, and just go and do their thing. And they can come back to Jesus when necessary. It's almost as if they think of Jesus' power and what he's done as if it were a commodity—something to be given, something to go and use as you see fit, and then to simply come back when you run out.

And so that brings up the central action of the narrative: understanding limits. In verses 23 and 24, after we hear that the father tells of exactly what's happening in the life of his son, we can imagine for just a moment how exposed to ridicule, shame—talk about powerlessness—that they had experienced as a family. Can you imagine for just a moment, as we've talked about before, the lengths to which this family would have gone to relieve their son of this spiritual possession? I will not argue this morning for the validity of spiritual possession. I simply want to allow the Scriptures to claim what it does. It believes in spiritual, demonic possession. And that is what Jesus is dealing with here. But nonetheless, it would have exposed them to shame and ridicule.

And Jesus, it seems at first, after the father says, "Hey, listen, I came to your disciples. They couldn't get it done." Jesus, in verse 19, says these things. And he answered them, "O faithless generation." Who was he answering? If we're not careful, it seems as if this is how he's responding to the father. But that's not who he's responding to. He's responding to his disciples. And he looks at them, and he says, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?" Meaning, "Don't you yet get it? That your attempt to heal this child was done in faithlessness, apart from me? Even though you

might have been attempting to do it in my name. Even though you were doing even perhaps what you thought I had called you to do, you were doing this thinking you could do it without reliance upon me.”

And so the father, however, in hearing this, Jesus responds to him in a compassionate way. “How long has this been happening to him?” Because as this boy is brought to Jesus, the demons who have possessed him do what the demons have done prior in the Gospel of Mark. They know exactly who they’re getting ready to face, and they convulse the boy violently again. And Jesus, seeing this, says, “How long has this been happening?” And the father says, “From childhood.”

And then this interesting exchange. “Have compassion on us and help us, if you can do anything.” And in response to that statement, Jesus calls on, at first, what this father seems to be saying, “If you can.” In other words, “Your disciples have limits. Do you?” And Jesus calls him into understanding of where the limits are. If you can, all things are possible for one who believes. So Jesus says, “I don’t have limits. You do.” The father knows this, which is why he cries out. “I believe. Help my unbelief.”

Ladies and gentlemen, if we wonder what the heart of the Christian faith is, it is this statement: I believe, and yet within me, there lies powerful doubt and unbelief. In this statement, this simple cry, is both honesty, also transparency of a humble heart that understands its limits. I do believe that you are Jesus. The problem isn’t you; the problem is me. Help me in my unbelief. He knows his limits—the limits of his understanding, the limits of his love, the limits of his hope, the limits of his power. He pleads for help.

Now, notice—if you fall off on either side of this simple confession, we try to avoid Jesus, but how easy is it for us to fall off on one or the other of this confession? “I believe.” That’s what the disciples did. And yet they thought that they could simply take that belief and transform it to act out what they thought they needed to do, without going back for help. You can have an overconfidence, a faith in your faith. But the other side is equally deadly—to be locked in unbelief. Do you often feel that? Do many of you feel that?

One of the ways in which we can get locked into unbelief is simply this reality—it can look like different things. It can look like we’re afraid to ask for healing, we’re afraid to ask for the Lord to intervene in particular circumstances, and we do not go to Jesus because we feel we will look only—we refuse to go to Jesus acknowledging our need for help, that he can do something. And as one writer says, “Because we will only look at our own ugliness and not at Jesus’s gracious, transforming beauty. We keep ourselves from the one thing that can save us—that has, in fact, saved us—even though we will not trust it.” Being locked in unbelief means we refuse to look at the beauty of Jesus, and we only want to look at the ugliness of our circumstances or ourselves.

But this simple cry of faith has both sides. “I believe. Yet, no—help me in my unbelief.” That is a statement of confession. It is a cry, a plea for help. And it is a callout of confession. “Father, forgive me. Have mercy upon me, a sinner.” Another simple heart-of-faith prayer. Consider this hymn, “Come Ye Sinners.”

Come, ye weary, heavy laden,
Bruised and broken by the fall;
If you tarry 'til you're better,
You will never come at all.
Not the righteous, not the righteous;
Sinners Jesus came to call.

Come, ye weary, heavy laden,
Bruised and broken by the fall;
If you tarry 'til you're better,
You will never come at all.

Not the righteous, not the righteous;
Sinners Jesus came to call.

Lo! The Incarnate God, ascended;
Pleads the merit of His blood.
Venture on Him; venture wholly,
Let no other trust intrude.
None but Jesus, none but Jesus
Can do helpless sinners good.

Come ye sinners, poor and wretched. Don't let conscience allow you to stay stuck and locked in unbelief. Don't allow your pride to think, "If I'm only fit enough, then I can come to Jesus." No. Come broken, bruised by the fall. "I believe, but help me in my unbelief." That has great application to whatever you brought into the doors this morning—a situation at work, a situation in your marriage, your friendships, your loneliness, your pride, your doubt. It is because it is the heart of faith.

But then we're drawn again, in this narrative, to radical reliance. "Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, 'I believe; help my unbelief!'" And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." And yet the disciples say, "Why could we not cast it out?" And then Jesus responds, and he says "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer." It's not that Jesus is inviting us into a formula. No, he's drawing us into and inviting us—inviting the disciples—back to what is the source of strength and power, what is the source of faith, the gifts of God. It isn't the gifts we look for; it is the Giver. He invites them back to this radical reliance.

Now, the word "radical," I am not using that in the newest use, of something that cool, something that's really sort of counter-cultural, going its own way. In fact, the original meaning of the word "radical" is anything but the way it's used now. The word "radical" says anything that goes back to the root source, the original. And so what Jesus is saying is the root of faith, the root of your gifts, the root of all that you have is nothing other than the one to whom we pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Is that not what he did with the Son? He delivered us from evil. It is exactly the case. He calls us back not to a formula of prayer but to what prayer connects us to—to the One who is the source of all strength and power.

And what's happening within this narrative is something else, and that we need to pay attention to—the progression of Mark is going to speed up. Because the increased strength and resistance of the demonic power against Jesus in his presence is growing. This is the most violent outbreak at Jesus calling out demons. Yet he heals. Yet the disciples say, "Why can't we?" Jesus responds, "Only through prayer." Why? Because only he can. Jesus recognizes that while he heals this child of demonic power, that the only thing that is going to truly break demonic power and the grip of unbelief, the grip of sin, will be his own life, and to be raised on the third day, victorious over sin and death.

Jesus knows this coming, and so does the one who rages against him, Satan and his power. And yet, Jesus says, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer." And what does Jesus teach us? Jesus teaches us in the garden of Gethsemane that he can only give of himself and he can only go to the cross in preparation, through prayer. "Father, if it be your will, take this cup," and the Lord does not. And yet Jesus knows he will drink from this cup of wrath.

What are we learning from Jesus? We're learning that Jesus in his teaching and in his daily life, even in the performance of this healing, even in responding to the disciples—he is the one who's going ahead of us in perfect obedience. Even Jesus, the Son of the Living God, relies and trusts in the power and

will of the Father who sent him. It is Jesus who does these things by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is Jesus, as we've looked at in the Gospel of Mark, who goes ahead of us walking by faith, who demonstrates what radical reliance is. "Father, take this cup, if it be your will." But he knew that it would call him to radical reliance.

And so it isn't a message to you and to me, "Be faithful. Be trusting." No. Because we're like the father: "We believe. Help us in our unbelief." What that does is it's an acknowledgement that even belief is a gift. Faith is a gift. But even the exercise of the gift must lead us back to the source of the gift: Jesus. Jesus, precious Jesus. Consider these words. It's the words of a prayer.

Dear Jesus, what a specific, staggering, atoning love you have shown us in the midst of our weakness. On our behalf, you flawlessly trusted your Father. You relied perfectly on his Spirit and were willing to obey every element of every law and every command and every instruction. Your love for us and your trust for your Father caused you to be silent before you false accusers, enduring tortuous punishment for our sins you did not commit. The sins you were dying for were ours, and we are eternally, deeply grateful for this inconceivable act of love. Because you took on our sin, becoming an orphan as you were abandoned by your father, we will never be orphans again. Our sins, though like scarlet, are now as white as snow before the judgment seat. Washed in the cleansing, healing stream of the blood drawn from your veins. Help us, our Father, to trust you in the midst of this earthly life. We grow weary and our strength is small as we fight earthly sin in our hearts and in the world around us. Help us to find our all-in-all in no less than Jesus Christ himself. Cause us to live so that others would see the strength to trust you. Help us to sing salvation songs at the midnight of our sufferings. Awaken us to trust in the midst of the prison of our sinful flesh, and remind us that our freedom has fully and finally been bought by the precious blood of Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen.

This is what we are called to: the gift of faith and trust in Jesus. But that gift requires the sustaining strength and power from the One who has lived it before us. 'Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus. He invites us. He invites you and me to do that this morning. Let us do that by prayer this morning, and that the Lord may prepare us to celebrate this supper. Let's pray.

Now, our Heavenly Father, through the gift of your Son, our Lord, our Savior and Mediator, Jesus Christ, may you by your Holy Spirit pour out new life on all flesh. And on all who can hear it this morning, may you pour out your Spirit to give us the gift of faith. But also, we pray, help us in our unbelief. The disciples did not get it, and we do not often get it either. We need to come back to you every day and say, "Lord, help us." We thank you for Christ, who has obeyed on our behalf in every way, and through whom there is now life abundant and eternal, and a strength that is with us. Help us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.