

Mark 9:14-29

¹⁴When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. ¹⁵As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

¹⁶"What are you arguing with them about?" he asked.

¹⁷A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. ¹⁸Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

¹⁹"O unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me."

²⁰So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

²¹Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?"

"From childhood," he answered. ²²"It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."

²³"If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes."

²⁴Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

²⁵When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again."

²⁶The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." ²⁷But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

²⁸After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?"

²⁹He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer."

+++++

THE GOOD FATHER

1.

To the dads, happy Father's Day.

In the comic strip "Calvin and Hobbes," Calvin says to his father: "Your new polls are in, Dad."

"Mmm," responds his father.

"A vast majority of household 6-year-olds say you're not living up to their expectations of fatherhood."

"What were their expectations?" inquires his dad.

"That you'd be more like an automatic teller machine."

Founder and president of Focus on the Family, Dr. James Dobson, says he keeps a particular photograph in his files to remind him of what parents go through today.

It is of an elegantly dressed woman who is holding a cup of coffee. Her little finger is cocked ever so daintily, and her face reveals complete self-assurance.

Unfortunately, this woman does not yet know that her slip has collapsed around her feet.

The caption reads: Confidence is what you have before you understand the situation.

That's the trouble with much of our thumbs-up confidence.

We are ignorantly confident and so brashly unaware of our own limitations.

In order for our confidence to work for us and not against us, we must humbly acknowledge the boundaries of our own power.

We must not only bow before those things beyond our ken; we must also kneel in prayer before the God of grace and glory.

2.

Today's Bible lesson makes sense only in relation to what has gone before.

Immediately preceding today's passage in Mark is the account of Jesus' transfiguration.

Select disciples, namely Peter, James, and John, are given a glimpse into exactly whom Jesus is.

Enveloped in a cloud with Jesus atop a mountain, Peter, James, and John hear the voice of God declare that Jesus is his son and that they are to listen to him.

In stark contrast to this display of power and glory, we have in the very next passage an account of the disciples' impotence.

Jesus, Peter, James, and John come down the mountain.

A crowd has gathered.

An argument seems to be in full cry.

We learn that the disciples were unable to exorcise the demons from the young boy who had been brought to them by his father.

Apparently, the scribes are pointing out that Jesus and his followers are charlatans.

Persons in the crowd explain to Jesus what has happened.

The boy's father then provides the detail.

The boy, since childhood, suffered from what the father calls a dumb spirit.

The spirit seizes the boy.

Often times, the seizures result in physical injury and then rigidity.

Jesus' disciples were called upon to help.

Their efforts proved fruitless.

The boy was still beset by his malady.

At the end of this encounter, Jesus will heal the boy.

But first, he preaches.

The crowds, the disciples, the boy, the boy's father, Jesus calls them a faithless generation, unbelieving.

Jesus then laments his earthly sojourn among them.

Jesus sounds like a man who would rather be elsewhere, with other people, doing other things.

Out of context, Jesus words are mystifying.

We don't ordinarily cast Jesus as an impatient man, capable of being annoyed.

Here, his words express anger and irritation.

In context, however, the words begin to make sense.

Stories have circulated as to what Jesus has done and what he is capable of.

At this point in his public ministry, Jesus has rebuked a storm and calmed the seas [Mk 4].

He has confronted and restored the maniac among the tombs [Mk 5].

And, he has resurrected Jairus' daughter [Mk 5].

Despite these displays of God's power breaking through in Jesus, faithlessness persists. Still, few or none believe.

The father asks Jesus to pity him and his son.

The father asks Jesus, if he can, to please heal his boy.

Here, Jesus seemingly mocks the man.

The man says to Jesus, "If you can . . ."

Jesus repeats the man's words, "If you can . . ."

Jesus is astonished that the man would doubt what Jesus can do for his son.

The man, realizing his lack of faith – his unbelief, asks something else of Jesus.

In addition to healing for the boy, the man pleads for the gift of faith for himself.

He wants to believe that Jesus can heal his son, but needs help doing so. After the boy is healed, Jesus and his disciples engage in a moment of private conversation.

The disciples want to know why they failed where Jesus succeeded.

Why, they want to know, were they unable to cast the demon from the boy?

Jesus' answer is a curious one.

He tells them that "this kind" required "prayer".

Evidently, there are different kinds of demon possessions.

Some apparently require prayer.

At no point in the passage is prayer offered or mentioned as having been offered.

Hmm?

3.

Okay, we now have the story firmly before us.

Let's talk about what it means for us.

There are two things I want us to consider from the passage.

One, there is this business of faithlessness.

Would you agree with me that the world could be a better place?

Things are amiss, off kilter, distorted.

There are a lot of smart people making brilliant analyses of the world's woes and then offering counsel as to how we might begin to remedy such woes.

We should heed many of them.

The Christian faith offers an analysis as well.

The Christian faith offers a remedy, too.

It is unique.

It is spiritual in nature, theological.

The Christian faith affirms with the Bible God's good creation, humanity's sinfulness, and God's recreation by atoning for our sin in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of God's son Jesus Christ.

We appropriate what God has done for us in Jesus through faith.

Put simple, we trust God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

The brokenness we experience on a regular basis has a root cause: human sinfulness, our sinfulness.

But the brokenness we experience on a regular basis also has remedy: God's grace.

Fundamentally, Jesus is pointing out that there are two paths in life: faith and faithlessness, belief and unbelief.

Neither path exempts us from the vagaries of living.

We, and those we love, will get sick; our hearts will ache; disappointments will persist.

On one path things like illness and heartache and disappointment have the final say and define us.

On the other path, something else – rather, someone else – has the final say and we are defined altogether differently.

In our story, the man no longer wants to tread the path of faithlessness.

He asks Jesus to help him get on the path of faith, which is the path where he experiences the beginning of God's restoration of humanity in the healing of his son.

Mark tells us this story of Jesus because he wants us to move from faithlessness to faith along with the father, from unbelief to belief.

4.

This brings us to the second matter I want us to look at this morning: prayer.

I have long been puzzled by Jesus' answer.

Read literally, Jesus' answer suggests that if only the disciples prayed for the demon to leave the boy their exorcism would have been successful.

Meaning, by prayer Jesus is suggesting something far bigger and broader than words offered to God on a particular occasion about a specific thing.

Prayer, here in Mark 9, means a sustained life of intimacy with God through personal communion.

Prayer here, I don't believe, is something like the swiftly uttered petitions we all are familiar with – God, let the light stay green; God, grant my children safe travel; God, give me a peaceful night's sleep; God, heal my friend.

These petitions are absolutely essential.

They matter to God.

They matter to us.

They matter to the people on whose behalf we speak them.

But, they matter most when practiced in the context of prayer as a whole of life, prayer as a life of close communion with God.

Prayer as life, prayer as communion with God, provides the power to overcome any and all obstacles in life, even evil itself.

This is the life Jesus embodied.

It is the life Mark gives us a glimpse into on the mount of transfiguration.

It is the life Jesus gives to the disciples, to the father of the son in the story, and to you and me.

It is the life of faith.

Amen.