

Mount Olive Lutheran Church  
Sermon for Sunday, September 13, 2009  
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Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's reading from the Gospel of Mark seems like that of an iconic scene from a great movie. It's just after the Transfiguration, when Jesus was on the mountaintop with Peter and James and John and He's shone like the brightness of heaven. And Moses and Elijah were there, and they talked about His upcoming death. And now Jesus marches down the mountain, back into battle.

You can almost hear the soundtrack playing in the background, perhaps a tune from the hymn we just sang, "Christ the Lord of Hosts Unshaken". The story even reads like a dramatic scene, filled with action and dialogue and plot movement and all these different things. But like with every great movie, story, book or play, it's really the characters that draw you in. And that's really what supports this reading from Mark, the characters of this story...

You have the man who has come in need of help. His son has been possessed by this spirit, this demon - to the point where the demon has so much control over him that he throws him into water and fire, trying to destroy him. You know how much parents struggle with their own children. How much more tiring and exhausted must this man have been? Bringing this son up from childhood with this demon possession. He comes and he brings this child to Jesus. And Jesus isn't there. So he goes to His disciples, because Jesus is up on the mountain, and brings his son to them and asks them for help.

You have the disciples as well. Jesus is away - up on the top of a mountain. Away from them, away from all of the troubles that are down in the valley. And someone brings them someone to help. They had cast out demons before, as Jesus sent them out and the 72 out. They'd seen Jesus do all these things. But they struggle, and they cannot help this man. They cannot help the child.

You have the crowd that's all around them. Not much is said of them, but you can imagine all of the reasons for being there: the spectacle of it all - seeing this child who is possessed by this demon, frothing at the mouth; seeing these disciples whom so much word had been spread about and their master, Jesus...all gathering around to see what is going on. Maybe laughing that the disciples cannot do these things that they say they can do. Maybe laughing at the man. Maybe actually there out of compassion.

Then you have the demon, there kind of in the background of the story, but a curse to those who encounter him. Not powerful at all against Jesus, but with those who are there and the disciples, not able to be cast out. Controlling the scene and almost probably even mockingly being there, laughing that nothing can happen to him.

Then you have Jesus. Marching down the mountain, back into the battle that He has come to take on. In total control of the situation. Handling it perfectly, like any protagonist would. Asking all of the right questions and being in command of the whole situation, saying the right words, and conquering that demon.

The demon is no match for Christ. Jesus comes and the demon is brought there and upon seeing Him and hearing Him, convulses the boy even more, and knows that its reign is just about done.

The characters really drive this story, and they drive the theme which the man says to Jesus, "I believe, help my unbelief." The man says it, but really everyone there should be praying it.

The disciples could pray it. It troubled them that they couldn't help this man. It troubled them so much that when the day was done, when the battle had been fought (as much of a battle as it is in Jesus taking on a demon), they go back to the house and they ask, "Why couldn't we do this?"

Jesus says, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer." But you can imagine their frustration as they were there, helpless to help this boy. Trying to do what they wanted to do. Not in it for themselves, but Jesus is gone so they tried to help this man who has brought his child to see Jesus. And they can't.

Even the crowd should have the same attributed to them. Because when Jesus comes down, the first thing He says as He looks around is, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?" All of those there, He says - that generation - is without faith. Not believing, truly. "If you believe," He says, "anything can happen." To the one that truly believes. But none of them do. The disciples can't cast out the demon, the man can't help his own son. The boy can't do anything at all. And that's why the man prays, "I believe, help my unbelief."

He has come to Jesus and asks for His help. And he wants that help. He comes and he says, "If you can...anything. If you can do anything at all, please help me. Have compassion."

And Jesus almost mockingly looks at him and says, "If you can? Who do you think I am? All things are possible for the one that believes." The boy is brought there and Jesus, with the crowd gathering around Him, simply tells that demon to stop and to come out and to never enter him again. That demon listens to the voice of Christ because the Word of Christ is true and pure. And when Jesus speaks, things happen.

"I believe, help my unbelief," is the prayer of all of those that are there. It's the prayer of all of us as well. It's a prayer that we constantly pray because we are like all of these people in the text today. The reason that the story hits so close to home and why these characters are so vivid is because it's not just a story that's made-up. It's something that is real, that really happened. And we can identify with all of these different people of the story.

Really, at its core, we're the most like the boy. The boy, we haven't talked much about him. And there's a reason - because he really doesn't do anything in this text at all. The man brings him - his father brings the boy there to see Jesus. The demon controls him, makes him froth at the mouth and convulse and do all these different things. The boy doesn't do anything but sit there until Jesus speaks. Jesus speaks, the demon leaves, and then what does the boy do? He lays there like a corpse. All those those that are around there think that that boy, that child, is dead. And yes, maybe Jesus is great - He got rid of the demon, but look at what He's left of the boy.

Then Jesus reaches down and He touches the boy and He lifts him up, and the boy rises. That's all of our story. Being dead in our trespasses and our sin, as Scripture tells us over and over again, Jesus comes and He touches us and He casts out the demon, the sinfulness, that's inside of us. He restores us and brings us life. He brings us to the waters of Holy Baptism. He baptizes us in His name, in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and that sinfulness in us is destroyed and removed. He brings us to His Table as we feast on His bread and His wine, His true Body and His true Blood, and forgiveness is granted and life is restored to us. We hear the words of Absolution, and we know that while we are poor, miserable sinners, dead in our trespasses, God forgives all of that. And He raises us up.

The problem that we all struggle with, though, is that we know that...and yet we still struggle, don't we? We don't hear much of the life of this boy, but I can imagine as he grows older, his faith wasn't completely there in Jesus. Because no one's is. Doubts probably entered his mind, just like they enter our minds. We grow up and we're like that man who cries out, "I believe." We know we believe. We know what Jesus has done for us. And yet we still struggle and we doubt, and we wonder if it's real. Like the man, we know where to go for help...but sometimes we wonder if Jesus can really help us. We wonder if He really can forgive all of that sin that is within us, because we know the evil that we've done.

Oftentimes we're like the disciples. We feel like we're the only ones that are around to help others, that Jesus, that God, is back up in heaven and now it's up to us. And sometimes when we think that, we see what happens and we struggle with that because we know we can't help. Because it's not within our power to do all of these things. And like the disciples, we pray, "I believe, help my unbelief."

The wonderful thing is that that prayer is something we can continually pray for the rest of our life. And Jesus continually answers it. This Word of God isn't teaching us just that we need to pray more or have a more complete faith. It teaches us that our faith is not perfect - but that the Object of our faith is.

You see, it didn't matter that the boy couldn't help himself in today's text. It didn't matter that the father didn't fully believe that Jesus would be able to help in a "100%" way. It didn't matter that the disciples couldn't do this miracle. Because Jesus does it.

All of the sin that's around Him, all of the unbelief of that faithless generation doesn't hinder Christ and His mission. It doesn't stop Him from healing that boy, casting out the demon, raising him to life again, and giving him forgiveness. Because it's not the faith of the generation, it's not our faith. It's the Object of that. When Jesus speaks, things happen, because He is the one that truly believes. If you believe, you can do anything. All things are possible for the one who believes is what Jesus says - and really He's talking about Himself.

All things are possible for Him, because He is the One who is perfect; Who believes all the way to the Cross. He knows what His mission is, and believes all the way through the cross, through the grave, into the resurrection. And God the Father raises Him from the dead - conquering sin, and Satan, and evil, and death. That is the wonder of God, that is the wonder of Jesus - that He is the one who is perfect and our faith is in Him. And it doesn't matter that we struggle and have doubts, because it's not *our* perfect faith, it's the faith that God gives to us. It's the faith of Jesus Christ that comes, fulfilling that Word and that promise of God, trampling Satan, defying death, bearing the brunt of our temptation and dying on the Tree. Yet being raised victoriously, and His life now supplies ours.

"I believe, help my unbelief," is our constant prayer, because our faith is not perfect...but its Object is. Jesus is the One who gives us forgiveness. He is the One who dies the perfect death, and marches on after this reading and goes into Jerusalem. St. Luke uses the words of our Old Testament lesson, "I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame."

Right after this story, as Jesus marches to Jerusalem - to do the perfect thing, to die for our sins, to not be put to shame. Although we look at Him on the Cross and we think that He is, but He conquers it. He turns his cheek to the one who would rip out His beard. He turns His back to the one that would strike Him. He is not put to shame. Instead He gives us perfection. He unites us to His life. He gives us salvation

Now may this peace of God which surpasses all of our understanding, may it keep and guard our minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.