

Mark 9: 14-29

14 When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. ¹⁶He asked them, 'What are you arguing about with them?' ¹⁷Someone from the crowd answered him, 'Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; ¹⁸and 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.' ¹⁹He 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.' ²⁰And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it threw the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. ²¹Jesus asked the father, 'How long has this been happening to him?' And he said, 'From childhood. ²²It 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.' ²³Jesus said to him, 'If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.' ²⁴Immediately the father of the child cried out, 'I believe; help my unbelief!' ²⁵When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, 'You spirit that keep this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!' ²⁶After 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.' ²⁷But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. ²⁸When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, 'Why could we not cast it out?' ²⁹He said to them, 'This kind can come out only through prayer.'

Commentary: Jesus comes down from the mountain to rejoin the rest of the disciples and the crowds, and what does he encounter? Anxious questions, desperate needs, feeble faith. A man had brought his child to Jesus for healing. But Jesus is not there. In his absence he has left the disciples in charge. The child's condition is so serious and disturbing, however, that the disciples are powerless to do anything. But the father cannot turn away. This child is his very flesh and blood. He has suffered his child's pain and helplessness for years. He has been an emotional and spiritual wreck.

When Jesus arrives on the scene, however, he does not simply pity the man. Rather, he does something much more essential for him. He challenges him to believe. The man responds with a confession that is classic: 'I believe; help my unbelief!' He is brutally honest and gut-wrenchingly sincere. Jesus acts immediately. The unclean spirit is exorcized and the child is freed to live at peace. But why, in the end, are the disciples unable to do what Jesus did? Prayer... bold, sincere, honest prayer.

Now prayer is not magic. It's not about us passively praying for some power from above to just heal and change things. If we pay attention to Jesus' approach, he wants to draw forth faith in people. Our faith and our prayer work together. Divine energy works in and through us and then passes into the world around us.

Moreover, such energy is not something we can control. Why does healing and change happen in some cases and not others, at least in terms that are obvious and clear? Whether physical health is restored or not, healing and change is something that can happen in any situation. How may divine energy through prayer heal/bless and transform me and the world around me through the healing, changing, accepting, letting go and engaging that is happening to me, because I believe? How is God's healing energy a force in my life even when my condition does not change in any way that's obvious to me or others? We need faith to see and be open to possibilities for living divine love ever more creatively in the face of what does not change in any apparent way in our lives and our world. Healing happens in ways we cannot see, and our own transformation is the ultimate goal of prayer whatever happens or does not happen on the outside.

Prayer: I believe, O God, help my unbelief. There are times and seasons of life where it's hard to have faith and hold on to faith. In this time of Covid-19, when so much is uncertain about the future, when we feel more vulnerable collectively and individually than ever before in our recent history... work in us the miracle of faith, O God. Open up our prayer in bold, honest and sincere ways. Create in us a greater passion for intimacy and transparency with you, the ground of our being; Amen.