

Anatomy of a Crisis

Mark 9:14-29

¹⁴And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him. ¹⁶And he asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" ¹⁷And someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute." ¹⁸And 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." ¹⁹And 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." ²⁰And 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. ²¹And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood." ²²And 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." ²³And Jesus said to him, "If you can! All things are possible for one who believes." ²⁴Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" ²⁵And 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." ²⁶And 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." ²⁷But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. ²⁸And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" ²⁹And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, this morning's sermon endured several false starts. Initially I titled this sermon "Spiritual Crises." Then changed it to "Anatomy of an Illness" and finally settled on "Anatomy of a Crisis." I suffered a kind of crisis early in the week; every time I checked my phone there was more bad news. I finally called on God in prayer, which is the intent of this text -- crisis, prayer, faith.

What constitutes a crisis? There is a dictionary definition but I have worked with my own definition for several decades. I define a crisis as a life situation with which a person cannot cope. The size or importance of a situation is irrelevant to its status as a crisis. If you are coping, however tenuously, then you are not in crisis. By the same token, no matter the size or importance of the challenge, if you cannot cope you are in crisis. People in crisis do not know which way to turn, where to seek help, or what to do! People in crisis are helpless. I also believe that self-talk plays a major role in many crises. If we tell ourselves something is a disaster, or tell ourselves that we cannot face further aggravation, or that there is nothing we can do, then we talk ourselves into a crisis.

And, oh, by the way, I believe the confusing information, angst, and disagreement over the pandemic, Covid 19, constitutes a crisis for many people. They feel unable to cope, unable to change things, unable to protect themselves and they latch on to whatever they can control -- wear a mask, do not wear a mask, get vaccinated or not get vaccinated. It is something I can do to take control of my life.

Every one of us faces potential crises every day. Situations familiar or unfamiliar may throw us off balance. If we cope, then we are not in crisis. If we fail to cope, then we are in crisis. Here is a simple illustration.

Suppose for example, you go to bed one evening knowing that you have an important, early morning appointment. You set your alarm clock a few minutes ahead. However, the power briefly fails during the night and your old alarm clock resets itself. Consequently, you wake up a few minutes later than intended. You might have a potential crisis but you decide to shave a few minutes off your morning routine by eating cold cereal instead of hot oatmeal, skipping your morning coffee, and foregoing washing your hair as a part of your morning shower. You finish your preparations and find yourself back on schedule, no crisis. When you enter the garage you find that the right rear tire of your car is flat. Nuts! You throw open your trunk only to discover that your jack is missing. You grab your cell phone in an attempt to reschedule, but no one answers the phone. You call a cab, but it will take twenty minutes to arrive and you only have ten. You are out of alternatives; you are no longer coping. Congratulations, you are now in a crisis!

Often a crisis builds in stages. You face a situation and the first thing you do is to examine the past for a similar event. Does what has worked in the past apply here? You try something and the situation resolves; you do not have a crisis. But suppose nothing from the past works, so you begin brainstorming for new ideas. You try one and the situation resolves, you do not have a crisis. You add your new solution to your mental file of coping strategies for potential future use. However, suppose that no matter what you try, nothing helps. The situation remains unresolved. You have a crisis.

I. People in Crisis

Our text for this morning reveals three sets of people in crisis or near-crisis. Obviously there is the young boy who suffers from demon possession manifested as normal epilepsy. Normal epilepsy or possession, the boy can do nothing about the situation. He is in crisis.

Then, there is the father who stands on the edge of a crisis. He has been unable to help his son. This is a frightening, frustrating feeling for any parent. It may lead to all manner of inappropriate responses and coping mechanisms. I have seen it happen! In this case the father has taken his son to all the best doctors but to no avail. Then the father brings his son to Jesus but finds Jesus' disciples instead. So far they have not been able to help either. The father stands at the event horizon of a crisis, a black hole threatening to draw him in.

The identity of the third group in crisis may surprise you. There are nine disciples in crisis. These are the disciples who remained behind when Jesus ascended the Mount of Transfiguration with Peter, James, and John. The remaining nine attempted to drive out the demon. Jesus previously had given them power when he sent them out in pairs. However, the demon defies them. The disciples grow desperate. They shout louder – individually, in pairs, as a group. The scribes stand by and mock, seeing an opportunity to discredit Jesus and his disciples. That is what the argument was about. The disciples stand humiliated before father and son, before the crowd, and before the scribes. The disciples have no more ideas; they are helpless. They are in crisis!

Can you empathize with these people? I can! I have gone through enough of my own crises – personal and spiritual. It drives you to your knees and makes you wonder if a more wretched and pitiable person ever blemished the face of the earth. My most severe crisis to date came about thirty-eight years ago at my first congregation.

Looking at the congregation from the outside everything appeared to be going splendidly. The congregation was friendly and supportive. Membership was up. I had almost ten times as many people in worship as we do here. Our school had tripled in size. Everyone told me what a great job I was doing, especially right out of the seminary. However, these were dark days of doubt and despair. I would leave my office, walk up the back stairs to the sanctuary, sit in the first pew and cry in frustration. The neighborhood was changing but the members of the congregation did not want to change to reach out to their new neighbors. Forced bussing was the driving force behind the sudden increase in school enrollment. School parents attended catechism classes and became members of the congregation to receive a substantial tuition discount. These new Christians and Lutherans did not understand that church offerings supported the school. And at the same time the organist and choir director were at each other's throats. A fellow pastor once told me that when the devil fell from heaven he landed in the choir loft. I tried one thing after another. I worked more hours. I spent less time with the family. I didn't take a day off for two years. Nothing worked; I was in crisis!

However, that was then but here, in this place, men and women are fighting more devils than were ever cast out of Mary Magdalene. Here, in this place, people sit quietly in their pews scarcely able to keep back their tears because of certain experiences they are having. Here are moral boundaries getting ready to flinch in the face of some hard duty. Here are people not knowing what to make of it all, saying in one breath, "Lord, if you can do anything, have compassion on us. Help us." Then saying in the next breath, "Help our unbelief, for we cannot seem to control any of it."

II. A New Factor.

As the disciples and scribes quibble, a new factor enters the scene. Jesus has returned from the Mount of Transfiguration. He could have encountered his own crisis at this point. His

disciples had failed a task they were more than capable of resolving. They had disappointed a desperate father who came seeking help for his son. His disciples engaged in futile argument with the scribes about the legitimacy of Jesus' ministry.

Jesus assesses the situation. He is alarmed but in control. He mourns the lack of faith he sees. This is a rare account where Jesus allows his deep feeling to reveal itself in words. Pain and disappointment wring a cry from his heart, "O faithless generation, how long am I going to be with you? How long am I going to bear with you?" However, the lack of faith to which Jesus points does not reside where we might suspect it does. Jesus does not bemoan the crowd's lack of faith. He does not bemoan the father's lack of faith. He bemoans the disciples' lack of faith! They surrendered to failure. They did not call upon their Savior, friend, mentor in prayer or in trust.

There is a cure for this crisis, and all the others – "all things are possible for those who believe." The father may have had his doubts. Jesus' disciples had failed. Would Jesus make a difference? The father responds, "I believe, cure my unbelief!" This man, in a sense, utters a prayer – a prayer for his son's healing and a prayer for the strengthening of his faith. Faith does not ask foolish or wrong responses from Jesus. Faith always bows to the will of Jesus in those things which we cannot be sure are good for us. The father turns to Jesus in supplication. The man has faith, maybe just a little, and his old nature wars against whatever faith he has, but he is not in crisis even though he cannot help himself. He turns to the one who can help, "I believe, cure my unbelief!"

Jesus is not in crisis. He can always cope and help us cope. Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit and cast it out. He stepped in and took charge. He took the sick boy by the hand and lifted him up and restored him to his father. It was the action of his own personality – pure, potent, redemptive – upon the disorder of life. His response drove people to testify to and praise God. Jesus exercises his ability according to his good and gracious will, which is always favorably disposed toward those who come to him in repentance and faith.

This is just one of many crises, large and small, with which Jesus copes. In the Garden of Gethsemane, when the mob came to arrest him, he was in control. "Whom do you seek?" "Put up your swords." He was in control in Pilate's courtroom. "You have no power over me except what is given to you." "I came to bear witness to the truth." "My kingdom is not of this world." Hanging from the cross he was in control. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." "It is finished." "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." This same Savior takes control in our crises.

This was a difficult lesson for me to learn at St. Luke. I cast around desperately for solutions. Nothing worked; I was in crisis. "God does not necessarily help those who help themselves." More likely it is, "God help those who help themselves." Sometimes God wants us to fall on our knees and look up. I needed to develop a thicker skin, but more importantly I

needed to go to him more frequently in prayer. I had to stop working like everything depended on me and trust like everything depended on God. I needed to give up my Messiah complex. It was God's church, God's situation, God's world. I was just the one who happened to be there at the time.

It was the same for the disciples. Jesus gave his apostles power over illness and demons and commissioned them to announce the arrival of God's kingdom. The disciples surrendered their ability too soon. As the crisis increased they may have worked harder but they failed to work smarter. They failed to drop to their knees in prayer to the one who called them, taught them, befriended them, forgave them, and gave them authority.

III. The Ultimate Crisis.

We must continually ask God to increase and protect our faith because ultimately we will encounter a particular situation with which none of us can cope -- death. We may deny it or ignore its finality, but there is nothing we can do about it. It exceeds our coping skills. Regardless of how big or small we are, young or old, powerful or weak, rich or poor, experienced or inexperienced; this is a situation to which we cannot respond adequately by ourselves. Thus, we are in crisis according to my definition. We cannot save ourselves. We cannot avert God's wrath and judgment.

God sent his Son who resolved all these crises and near-crises in our text. He resolved the crisis and then offered superb, new coping skills – faith and prayer. These are the only coping skills that will enable us to cope with the ultimate, final crisis.

While Jesus voluntarily surrendered his life for us on Golgatha, he had two thieves in a small congregation that day. His pulpit was a cross. The thief on his left remained bitter and rebellious; he could not cope with his situation. He would not surrender himself to the Savior hanging next to him; thus, even the Master could do no mighty work for him because of his unbelief. The crucifixion was all the Savior had. But the one on the right, when he heard Jesus say, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," and when he saw in the battered face the light of life, he timidly asked, "Lord, remember me when you come again your kingdom." The Lord did. He fed the famished soul with sympathy, with recognition, with forgiveness. When he passed on to the unseen, he was carrying that penitent thief in his arms "into Paradise." No more crisis, no more coping, no more futility. Jesus has triumphed; fall before him. Amen.

May the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Sola Dei Gloria!