

17th Sunday after Pentecost
“Lord, I believe! Help me in my unbelief!” (Mark 9:14-26)
September 15, 2024
Rev. Ed Weber

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, our text for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost is from our Gospel reading, Mark 9, beginning at verse 14.

“14 And when He came to the disciples, He saw a great multitude around them, and scribes disputing with them. 15 Immediately, when they saw Him, all the people were greatly amazed, and running to Him, greeted Him. 16 And He asked the scribes, “What are you discussing with them?”

17 Then one of the crowd answered and said, “Teacher, I brought You my son, who has a mute spirit. 18 And wherever it seizes him, it throws him down; he foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth, and becomes rigid. So I spoke to Your disciples, that they should cast it out, but they could not.”

So far the text:

Jesus had just come down the mountain of Transfiguration with Peter, James and John and at the foot of the mountain the rest of His disciples were waiting for Him. And with them a large crowd had gathered. This was about 6 months before Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. He had done many miracles of feeding the multitudes, healing the deaf, the mute, the blind, and He had driven out demons from the people.

The scribes and pharisees refused to believe that Jesus was the Son of God. As we have been hearing in Mark, they were focused on keeping their man-made traditions and commandments that they believed made them righteous. And so, it comes as no surprise that they were disputing with the disciples. The Master was away. What a perfect opportunity for the scribes to sow seeds of doubt and dissension among the crowd!

What are you discussing? Jesus asks. And before anyone else could answer, a desperate father answers. The father wasn’t interested in disputes and platitudes from the scribes. He was looking for immediate help for his demon possessed son.

What did Jesus say?

“19 “O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you?”

The key word is “faithless” – lack of faith. Jesus speaks to an unbelieving generation of Jewish people who had rejected Him when He told them that He is the Bread of Life. They would not eat of Him in faith. The apostle John wrote in his gospel in chapter 12 these words:

“37 But although He had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in Him, 38 that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spoke: “Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”

Jesus lamented over Jerusalem six months later as He approached it to willingly meet His death for the sins of the world!

“37 “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!”

But in the midst of unbelief and opposition, Jesus gladly takes the time to help a father in need. He not only helps father’s son, but helps the father’s faith!

Bring him to Me.” 20 Then they brought him to Him.

Jesus commands...Jesus invites...all people to come to Him with any problem.

“28 Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

Bring yourselves to Me with all your problems of sin, sadness, doubts, and any need – physical, emotional, material...For the One who just showed Himself to Peter, James and John as the Son of God in glory, has the power to meet any need. Come to me!

And when he saw Him, immediately the spirit convulsed him, and he fell on the ground and wallowed, foaming at the mouth.

The demon did not want to come near Jesus. Evil is filled with fear in the presence of the Holy One. The devil knows his time is short and within his power does all he can to cause grief, suffering, anguish and death.

21 So (Jesus) He asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. 22 And often he has thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him.” But if You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.”

That doesn't sound like a ringing endorsement of Jesus to me. “If...if You can...” There is no “ifs” when it comes to what Jesus can and can't do! Of course, our prayers to God should include an “if” but only when we say, “if it by Thy will”. We should never doubt what God almighty can do! The Syrophoenician woman spoke to Jesus with more faith as we heard in Mark 7. “Yet even the little dogs get the crumbs that fall from the table.” She held firmly to even a little crumb of Jesus compassion.

But Jesus gently speaks to the father and doesn't put out his smoldering wick of faith. Jesus strengthens him and He strengthens all of us also with His powerful word of truth!

23 Jesus said to him, “If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes.”

24 Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!”

Yes, there is faith, but it is weak. This is the prayer of every believer – you and me included! St. Paul speaks to each of us in 1 Corinthians 10:

“12 Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. 13 No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.”

We have a common enemy, the devil, against which we cannot stand alone. But God calls us to come to Him, and to take up His armour – the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, the breastplate of righteousness, the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, as we heard in Ephesians 6 two weeks ago.

And by the power of God's Word, we daily drown our sins in repentance instead of being drowned by the devil. And we escape being thrown into the lake of fire by trusting in Jesus who defeated the devil on the cross, and rescued us from his kingdom. So Jesus shows this power over the demon!

25 When Jesus saw that the people came running together, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "Deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him and enter him no more!" 26 Then the spirit cried out, convulsed him greatly, and came out of him. And he became as one dead, so that many said, "He is dead." 27 But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose."

The evil spirit had to obey Jesus. Jesus freed the boy! And Jesus frees us by the Gospel of forgiveness! Oh, how we need to hear it often! How we need to hear Jesus, the suffering Servant's, very thoughts in the Old Testament reading from Isaiah 50. Jesus endured suffering, shame and death on the cross to conquer all evil!

"6 I gave My back to those who struck Me, and My cheeks to those who plucked out the beard; I did not hide My face from shame and spitting. 7 "For the Lord God will help Me; therefore I will not be disgraced; therefore I have set My face like a flint, and I know that I will not be ashamed. 8 He is near who justifies Me; who will contend with Me? Let us stand together. Who is My adversary?"

And God justifies you and me through faith in Jesus so that we stand together. Who can contend with us with Jesus on our side? There is none! So, Jesus calls out to each of us and all who are watching this live stream with these words:

"Who obeys the voice of His Servant? Who walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord and rely upon his God."

And Jesus in His great compassion invites us to strengthen our faith and trust in Him through the gift of the Sacrament of the Altar. Our prayer, like the father, is "Lord, I believe, help me in my unbelief!" And Jesus does that by giving you His very body and blood in, with and under the bread and wine. Yes! All things are possible for those who believe Jesus' promises! Take and eat. Take and drink for the remission of your sins! Go in peace. Bring your sins to me often. Come to the table often for we are all needing help in our unbelief and there Jesus feeds us and strengthens us. What He won on the cross He gives to you personally – His salvation!

Oh, how we all have doubts and weakness. Who appeared with Jesus on the mountain of Transfiguration? Moses and Elijah. Did not Moses doubt God when he was sent to Pharaoh? Who am I? I am not eloquent. I am slow of speech and tongue. Send somebody else. And yet, God strengthened Moses for the task before him and forgave him his doubts and failings. There he stood in glory on the mountain with Jesus.

Elijah? Did he not give up on life? Totally depressed. Take my life he prayed when he was being pursued by Jezebel. But the Angel of the Lord, the second person of the Trinity, came to him and strengthened him in body and soul for his journey. There Elijah stood in glory at Jesus' transfiguration.

What does Jesus also promise you? Listen to 1 Peter 5:6-7.

“6 Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, 7 casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.”

“And this peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” Amen. (Philippians 4:7)