

## **Help My Unbelief!**

**November 11, 2012**

### **Mark 9:14-29**

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

She sat with her face in her hands. Her posture communicated defeat. Her voice quivered with despair. Her grandson, the child abandoned by his parents, the child she did not choose to raise, is seventeen, angry, violent, and out of control. Poverty, drug dealers, and the seduction of guns and easy money compound her hopelessness.

Things got so bad the courts forced him to participate in a scared straight program to see his future if things didn't change. He was taken with a group of teens to a maximum security prison for men. The inmates got in his face and told him what he could expect in prison. They told him he still had a chance – he still had choices. They told him only a coward hits his grandma and that she deserved better. To appease the inmates he hugged his grandma and told her he was sorry, but he didn't mean it. He was more appalled by the fact inmates have to use a toilet out where everyone can see them. The effects of the visit lasted a few days but within a week he was back to his old ways. His grandma is preparing herself to kick him out on the streets as soon as he turns eighteen. What else can she do? What can God do?

The father in our reading for today was willing to try anything, including dragging his son to Jesus' disciples to see what they could do, if anything. He'd heard rumors of healings and exorcisms and he was desperate for his son. His son's condition was dramatic and all-consuming. He was completely out of control.

Jesus wasn't around but the disciples thought they could handle it. Indeed they tried – they tried every which way from Sunday – but nothing happened. At this point the scribes started getting into it with the disciples and things were turning ugly.

Jesus walks in to this scene and the crowd runs to him, thankful that the boss finally here. “What are you arguing about with them (the scribes)?” The father steps forward to answer, explaining his son's condition and the inability of the disciples to heal him.

Jesus' response to this entire scene is a little bit like mine when I come home and find the house a complete disaster, “Do I have to do everything around here?” Then he turns his attention to the father and says, “Bring him here.” Immediately the spirit in the son throws him into convulsions and he flails around on the ground. Jesus asks, “How long has this been going on?” “Since childhood,” was the reply along with a few more details of his condition. The father then says to Jesus, “...if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.”

“If you are able?” Jesus seems indignant. “All things can be done for the one who believes.” The question isn't, “are you able?” The question is, do you believe? “I believe!” the father cried out, “help my unbelief!”

Can you both believe and not believe at the same time? It appears so. Can we profess faith in Christ and at the same time doubt God's ability to fix anything? Can we say we believe in God and at the same time wonder if God still cares? Can we know intellectually what were supposed to believe and still question in our hearts what we do believe? Can this guy really say, “I believe, help my unbelief?” Yes, yes, yes, and yes.

Mother Teresa became a symbol of selfless love and devotion as she ministered in the slums of Calcutta. She was lifted up as a model of faith. You might hear someone say, “Well, I'm no Mother Teresa...” as if Mother Teresa set the bar. (She did win a Nobel Peace Prize.) Yet when she died her own writings cast a shadow over her model life. In 1956 she wrote these words, “Such deep longing for God -- and ... repulsed -- empty -- no faith -- no love -- no zeal. (Saving) souls holds no attraction -- Heaven means nothing -- pray for me please that I keep smiling at Him in spite of everything.” Her writings further revealed that she struggled with doubt throughout the second half of her life, from the beginning of her time in Calcutta to her death. She had her doubts, but continued to act as if she believed. What does that make her?

Is it any different from a man who brings his son to Jesus to be healed while he still isn't sure Jesus is able to do it?

We talk all the time around here about “believing” in Jesus – but if we had 100% belief – we'd never doubt, never worry, never get discouraged, and never give up – we would be 100% certain – and if we were 100% certain we would be so unbearable and so arrogant no one would want to be around us and we'd never ask any questions. One of my favorite authors, Anne Lamott says, “The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty.”

If you don't like that quote how about this one by another great author Frederick Buechner, “Doubt is the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.” Doubts lead to

questions – questions lead more questions – and those questions keep us seeking. You CAN doubt and still believe...

But doubt has an ugly sister and she has been hanging around quite a bit lately. Her name is cynicism. Where doubt leaves open the door of possibility – cynicism slams it shut. Cynicism is negative, closed, and faithless.

Doubt wonders how God could let a grandma's prayers go unanswered. Cynicism has the kid in prison with no parole. Doubt questions how anything will change in impoverished and drug infested communities. Cynicism says it never will. Doubt is still willing to see some potential in a wayward seventeen year old. Cynicism writes him off as lost.

My hunch is that there is a little bit of both in all of us. That is why this father's prayer is so important for all of us trying to follow Jesus and his way...in the face of so many reasons not to believe – we believe! We believe God is able! We know with God all things are possible! We've just seen too much, been knocked down a few too many times, seen it all before...so we pray, "help our unbelief!"

The story ends with a curious twist. The son is healed. When the disciples ask why they couldn't do it Jesus says, "This kind only come out with prayer." While no one is sure exactly what Jesus meant – some speculate Jesus is referring to a different kind of unbelief – the kind that looks like certainty - the kind that says, "I can do this myself!" – The kind that doesn't rely on God at all. It's possible the disciples got a little full of themselves – thinking they could minister without God.

"This kind only comes out with prayer," Jesus said. It just so happens we know that prayer. "I believe! Help my unbelief!" Amen.