

Doubters Welcome
Mark 9:14-29
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Let us pray. Startle us, O God, with your truth and open our hearts and our minds to your word. That hearing we may believe, and believing trust you with our lives. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The New Testament lesson this morning is from the Gospel according to St. Mark, ninth chapter beginning with verse 14. Listen for God's Word. "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 them, ‘This kind can come out only through prayer.’” This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

What is your favorite Bible verse? ‘The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want’? ‘Behold I’m doing a new thing; do you not perceive it’? ‘Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the earth’? ‘He is not here; He has risen!’ ‘Nothing in all creation shall separate us from the love of God.’ Those are a few of my favorites. But high on my list – maybe at the top of the list – is ‘I believe; help my unbelief.’ I think that may just be one of the most important most meaningful verses in the Bible for those of us who live in this bewildering amazing time when traditional religious beliefs and practices are challenged on all sides from sophisticated intellectuals espousing a new atheism, to fundamentalist preachers embarrassing the rest of us with their outrageously confident pronouncements of what God is up to in the world – what God thinks about same sex marriage, transgenderism, American foreign policy, God’s favorite political party and candidate.

I’ve always identified with this man – the father. I’ve identified with him since that day long ago that an astonishing thing happened to me – I became a father, and I discovered among other things that I didn’t know a thing about babies. Hadn’t the foggiest notion of how to hold a baby, feed a baby, change a diaper. This little thing was now totally dependent on me and thanks be to God another person, my partner in this project, my young wife who in fact did know a great deal about how to do this. Parents know the wisdom and truth of the old saying that you are only as happy as your least happy child. So I know this father who brings his son Jesus. When your child hurts you hurt. When your child is disappointed you are disappointed. When your child is heartbroken, your heart breaks, too. And when one day you have to hand your child over to surgeons and nurses and watch as he or she is wheeled into the operating room, it is about as empty and helpless and vulnerable as it gets. So, I know this man.

A crowd, as always, has been following Jesus. In the crowd is a father and his young son. He’s not there for spiritual advice, he hasn’t come to get his soul

saves. He's there because he's desperate. He has told his story to the disciples to no avail so he has pushed his way through the crowd pulling the little boy behind him until they are standing in front of Jesus. The story pours out of him in clinical detail, 'Master, my son has an evil spirit. When it seizes him it knocks him down, shaking all over grinding his teeth, foaming at the mouth.' 'Bring him to me,' Jesus said. And it happens again, right there in front of Jesus – the little boy falls to the ground, rolls around grinding his teeth, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asks a diagnostic question, the very question contemporary physicians ask – 'How long has this been going on?' The father answers 'since childhood. Sometimes he even falls into the water and into the fire. If you are able, please have mercy and help us.'

Now notice that's not exactly a ringing affirmation of faith – 'If you are able.' That's an expression of skepticism born of a thousand disappointments. This man has tried everything. He's consulted with physicians and faith healers. He's gone everywhere there was an ounce of hope that someone might be able to help his son. 'If you are able; have mercy and help us.'

Jesus's response, frankly, makes me a little uncomfortable. In fact, at first, it sounds judgmental. 'If you are able,' Jesus responds, 'all things are possible for the one who believes.' Is the implication here that the boy has not been healed because his father doesn't believe enough? That it's his fault his son is suffering? Or is Jesus the one who believes and in whom all things are possible. In either event the vulnerable father cries out, "I believe!" And the sense of it, I've always thought is, 'alright, alright, I believe then. I'll say whatever you want me to say if it will help my son.' And then a moment of rare, pure, beautiful integrity, '*help my unbelief.*'

It is not possible to understand or explain what happens next. Everyone in the ancient world believed that evil spirits caused illness. In our world we know a little bit about psychosomatic symptoms and how healing is always something of a mystery and a miracle. So Jesus commands the spirit to come out of him – the boy is still in the throes of what sounds like an epileptic episode and now he's ridged – absolutely still. Jesus takes him by the hand, lifts him up,

brushes him off, pats him on the shoulder – and the text doesn't say this but I know he falls into his father's arms. Tears are streaming down the father's face and off they go home to a new and hopeful future in which anything is possible.

A careful reading reveals that there is an internal contradiction here. Jesus first says that healing a boy requires strong belief. The man affirms his beliefs sort of – and in fact confesses his unbelief. Jesus heals his son anyhow. John Calvin, careful tedious scholar that he was, observed about 'I believe; help my unbelief' that "these two statements may appear to contradict each other. But there is none of us who does not experience both of them in himself." Really, Calvin? Both *belief* and *unbelief* existing in all of us even John Calvin himself? Remarkable.

Somewhere we got the idea that belief means no unbelief; that having a religion means having no unanswered questions; that having faith means having no doubts at all. When you think about it though, religious certainty has caused a lot of tragedy in human history. If you have no doubts about the absolute truth of your religion, no unanswered questions, it seems logical to define someone who differs who adheres to another religion as an infidel – an enemy. Thinking like that leads to the conclusion that the world would be a better place without the other – the infidel, the heretic – that it might be a good idea to cleanse society of them. It's thinking like that that prompts young men to strap explosives to their body and blow themselves up in a marketplace or plow a car into a group of people who are protesting the violent potential of your certainty. And when that profound certainty creeps into politics, when ideological correctness is the sole criteria by which every idea is evaluated and decided, civil discourse ends and the goal is simply to prove the other wrong at all costs; the ultimate overriding goal is to defeat the other person or party in the next election regardless of the impact on the nation, or the world.

Apparently Jesus can handle a little unbelief. In fact there are some very good things to be said about doubt and uncertainty. The distinguished psychiatrist and philosopher Rollo May said the most creative people neither ignore doubt,

or are paralyzed by it. They admit it, explore it, and act in spite of it. There would be no advances in science and technology in medicine if there were no courageous people willing to risk ridicule and embarrassing failure by doubting conventional wisdom. Steve Jobs's genius was precisely his willingness to doubt the given in favor of the possible. Without honest creative doubt no one would ever have injected a lethal virus into a healthy person's arm in the hope that it would immunize him or her from polio, measles, or small pox. Without courageous creative doubt no surgeon would ever have dared operate on an open exposed human heart.

The great theologians have always recognized that faith and doubt are not incompatible. In fact, honest faith includes honest doubt. Paul Tillich said, "if doubt appears it should not be considered a negation of faith, but an element which was always and will always be present in the act of faith." Søren Kierkegaard, a nineteenth century Danish philosopher and theologian whose philosophy majors are still reading and still trying to understand, helped many of us with his concept '*the leap of faith*'. "Your intellect your reason will take you only so far," Kierkegaard said, "you will never so long as you are alive eliminate all doubt. Finally you must leap into the darkness..." he called it 'the leap of faith.'

The last book William Sloane Coffin wrote before he died was *Letters To A Young Doubter*. When his young correspondent expresses doubts about Christian faith Coffin responds, "Don't be anxious about your new found doubts. Doubts move you forward, not backwards. In my experience a religious faith in spite of doubt is far stronger than a faith without doubt." I suspect that everyone has doubts. When life strikes a particularly cruel blow no one is immune to doubting the presence and providence of a loving God. Who wouldn't doubt in the midst of a hurricane, or earthquake that just wiped out everything you have – your house, your possessions. No one who has experienced or witnessed innocent suffering has not in some way or another lodged a complaint with heaven and asked simply: Why?

John Claypool, Episcopal priest, popular author, preacher and lecturer, at the very top of his profession his eight year old daughter, Laura Lou, was diagnosed with acute and deadly leukemia. Devastated, Claypool struggled as any parent would and afterward wrote a very helpful book about the whole experience: *Tracks Of A Fellow Sufferer*. Claypool describes how as a minister and priest he had walked with many people over the years through the valley of the shadow and now he found himself asking the same question they all had asked – *why*? After his daughter’s death Claypool concluded that the only answer to ‘why’ is not an answer but a realization; a confession that every life is a gift that was not deserved or earned but a pure gift of God’s grace. Along the way he wrote wise words about faith and doubt. He said it was important to question God. He wrote, “There is more honest faith in the act of questioning than in the act of silent submission. Questioning God is in itself an act of faith. I believe ‘help my unbelief’ is an honest confession of prayer and expression of ultimate hope; there is a God to complain to, a God to question and doubt and to argue with.

The marvel in this story is that the father didn’t have very much to bring to Jesus – his partial flimsy faith, his concoction of belief and unbelief, his vacillation between a grateful faith one day and the next day nothing. What he had to bring – all he had to bring – to Jesus was the deepest most powerful and holiest thing in his life: his love for his son. And it was enough. Somehow the word got around that if you have doubts you need to get them resolved before you go to church. Somehow word got around that if you have honest doubts about the truth of the Gospel and the relevance of Christianity - or even the existence of God - you don’t belong in church.

Well, nothing could be further from the truth. If you’re standing outside because you’re not sure what you believe c’mon in. You’ll meet plenty of people just like you inside. If you have serious questions bring them to church – you’ll meet plenty of people who have the same questions and you’ll find a place where the questions are taken seriously; where people agree to consider them, talk about them, maybe even argue about them. And finally in our life together to bring them to Jesus.

One of my mentors over the years has been Douglas John Hall, a professor of theology – retired now - McGill University in Quebec. He’s a delightful, kind man. “Faith,” Hall wrote, “is not having no doubt but trusting God in spite of our doubts. There is no more important responsibility for the minister,” Hall said, “then to say regularly from the pulpit ‘doubters are welcome here.’”

The marvel of this little story – the good news is that while the father didn’t have much to bring to Jesus other than his love for his son, it was enough. You don’t have to have it all figured out. You don’t have to be morally perfect. You don’t have to have faith like the Rock of Gibraltar. You can in fact bring what you have – your questions, your doubts, your fears, your hopes, your dreams, your deepest holiest love. It will be enough.

I’ve returned to this little story many times over the years and it has never lost its relevance and power. And each time over the years I have turned to an old revival hymn that we don’t sing much anymore, but a hymn that seems to me to be the right and best – and maybe the only way – to conclude this: *Just as I am, though tossed about with many a conflict, many a doubt, fighting and fears within without O lamb of God, I come, I come. Amen.*