

The Prayer of the Father

Mark 9:14-29 – First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest – August 15, 2021

On a warm Saturday morning, a five-year-old girl scrunched up her face and narrowed her eyes as her father said, “Okay, this is it! You’re going to ride your bike today without training wheels!” The girl nodded grimly and adjusted her helmet for the umpteenth time. “Are you ready?” her father said, a great big smile on his face--which didn’t quite reach his anxious eyes. “You can do it! Here we go!” The father gently but firmly pushed her forward, and the little bike went teetering down the sidewalk, quickly gaining speed.

Just a day earlier, the father sat in his home office as a voice on the other end of his cellphone said, “Ah, Roger? We’re very impressed with your qualifications and think you’d be a great fit with our team. We’re still in the interviewing stage, but you’re right at the top—the very top—of our candidates going forward. We still have a couple of more interviews to conduct, but you should be hearing from us very, very soon.” As his cellphone went dark, the father sat very still, looking at the picture of his five-year-old daughter, thinking very, very hard.

On the following Monday, the five-year-old’s grandmother was sitting in Surgical Waiting as her husband underwent a procedure. The procedure was supposed to take less than an hour, but more than two hours had passed. Suddenly the surgeon appeared, motioning her toward a small conference room. As he closed the door behind him, she looked searchingly in his eyes.

These three very real stories have one thing in common:

“I believe. Help my unbelief.”

II

When Jesus came down the mountain with Peter, James and John, his closest disciples had seen him as he truly is” the Only-Begotten Son of the Father, glistening in heavenly glory and light. They had heard the Voice of God saying, *“This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him!”* And now, at the mountain’s foot, they came upon a scene of confusion and contention much like Moses encountered when he came down from Mt. Sinai and found the Children of Israel worshipping the Golden Calf. They were both scenes of faithlessness. In Mark’s Gospel, a great crowd of people were there, and the rest of his disciples were arguing with the scribes.

“What are you arguing about?” said Jesus—and by the words which follow, we can deduce that Jesus was somewhat put-out. A father emerges from the crowd, with his young son beside him, and we learn from the text that this boy carried an evil spirit which sounds very much like the affliction of epilepsy: a terrifying malady which my older brother has lived with since he was a boy.

Apparently, Jesus' disciples were unable to heal him and the scribes were criticizing their efforts. Earlier on in Mark's Gospel, we learned that Jesus had previously sent out the Twelve two-by-two with authority over unclean spirits. In this case, their authority was not effective. In the absence of their leader, had their faith faltered?

Jesus says, *"Bring the boy to me...How long has this been happening to him?"* The father describes the history of his affliction, and ends by saying, *"But if you can do anything, have pity on us and help us."*

What happens next just might reveal our Lord at his most exasperated. *"If you can!"* he replies. *"All things are possible for one who believes."*

Now that is quite a statement, isn't it? "All things?" Will I win the lottery? Will I never get sick? Will we cool off the planet? Will the members of Congress start working together for good?

Are all things really possible? Jesus doesn't actually say that. He said *"...for the one who believes."* Believes what? That he's actually going to win the lottery? And Congress is going to start singing, "Kum Ba Ya?"

No. By everything we read in the Bible, Jesus meant all things are possible for the one who believes "in me."

In me. Which is to say, in the meaning and message of the Kingdom—and the glory and grace of the One who is bringing it: Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This in the One who makes all things possible—in the name and by the power of his love.

Believing in Jesus doesn't mean you'll win the lottery and never get sick. Believing in Jesus does mean making a decision to trust, a decision which will bring you into a living relationship which will open to you the full possibilities of life in the Spirit and the work of the Kingdom here on earth. *"I have come that they may have life,"* he said, *"and have it in abundance."* No matter what. No matter where. No matter how. I believe this is what he meant when he said, *"All things are possible..."* And this is surely what God meant when God said from the Mountain, *"Listen to him!"*

Later on, on the night before his crucifixion, Jesus said to his followers, *"If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it."*

"In my name."

But now we turn to the heart of the passage: the father's response, which seems to be ripped right out of his agonized heart. *"I believe!"* he says. *"Help my unbelief!"*

Novelist Flannery O'Connor says of this passage,

"Lord, I believe, help my unbelief is the most natural and most human and most agonizing prayer in the gospel." Why? Because it expresses the full scope and vulnerability of our faith—and our doubt as well. You may be asking, "How can belief and unbelief exist in the same person?" The answer must embrace the truth that we are all a mixture of faith and doubt. To walk (or in the little girl's case to ride your bike) by faith doesn't mean you have no doubts, anymore than being brave means never having any fears. Courageous people move forward despite their fears. And faithful people do exactly the same thing, even in the shadowy presence of their enemies: their doubts and their fears. They move forward. They walk by faith—not by sight.

No, faith and doubt are just two sides of the same human coin. But the amazing thing—the critically important thing about the father's prayer is actually that one little word in the middle:

Help.

Help us.

Help my unbelief.

You see, it is one thing to go through life carrying all your hopes and your fears alone; your self-confidence and your self-doubt, too—carrying the impossible burden of all of that upon your weakening shoulders, when you could turn to the One who said, *"Come to me with your burdens, and I will give you respite."* I ask you, what burdens are greater than our sin and grief, our doubts and our fears? *"Come to me,"* said Jesus. *"And I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you,"* he said. He didn't promise to take away our burdens, did he? He does promise to help us carry them: all the way to the finish, as we live our lives yoked to his.

Conclusion

Flannery O'Connor believed the father's prayer is "the foundation prayer of faith." She saw that when we really begin to trust God—trust enough to bring everything to God, including our sins, our griefs and our doubts...

Well, that's when the training wheels come off, don't they? And we feel the grace of God upon us; and the Presence of Christ by our side; and the Wind of the Spirit gently but firmly pushing us forward...

into the Life that is really life: a Life that is both vulnerable and victorious, where all our faith—
and our doubts, too—are held in the palm of God’s Hand.

Let us pray:

Lord, we believe. Lord Jesus--help our unbelief.

Amen.

Rev. Clinton G. Roberts