

THE POWER OF JESUS

Mark 9:14-29

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

September 16, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 9, verses 14 through 29. It is on page 714 of the pew Bible. This miracle teaches us about the power of faith, the power of Jesus' Word, and the power of prayer. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Mark 9, beginning at verse 14, we read in Jesus' name.

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

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

This text is about prayer. I'll give you that much right at the beginning so you can know where we're going. But you still have to pay attention to see what exactly Jesus teaches us about prayer. He teaches us about the power of prayer. Apparently there is a kind of demon that can only be driven out by prayer. Nothing else will work. So this is a text about the power of prayer.

This text is also about faith. In the middle Jesus has a conversation with the boy's father about faith and how **"All things are possible for one who believes"** (9:23). So this is also a text about the power of faith.

And this text is also about Jesus' Word. When Jesus finally drives the demon out, he does it simply by speaking. So this is also a text about the power of Jesus' Word.

So we could go any one of three directions with this text. We could make it about the power of prayer, we could make it about the power of faith, or we could make it about the power of Jesus' Word. And any one of those three directions would be close to the point, but not quite there, because all three of these are really about the power of Jesus. Prayer has no power of its own apart from Jesus. Faith has no power of its own apart from Jesus. And words have no power—or, at least, no supernatural power—apart from Jesus. The power of prayer, the power of faith, and the power of the Word are all dependent on the power of Jesus.

So let's look at the text, and as we go through it, we'll point out the golden details. Often times, especially in the gospels, there are these little details that really make the text shine. Sometimes they're just little things that make you say, "Well that's cool." Other times they're actually kind of confusing. They make us stop and say, "Wait a minute," and we have to think about them for a bit. A couple of the golden details in this text are like that. They'll take a little bit of thought, but usually these golden details teach us something. And I think they're kind of fun too. So I'll point out three golden details. One of them has to do with faith. Another has to do with Jesus' words. And the last one has to do with prayer.

The scene opens with Jesus and three of his disciples—Peter, James, and John—coming back from his transfiguration. While Jesus and the three were up on a mountain, an argument broke out down below between the disciples and the scribes. So Jesus asks what the argument is all about, and a man from the crowd speaks up. It was about his demon possessed son.

It was a fairly violent demon. The demon had been doing all sorts of things to hurt the boy, like throwing him on the ground or into a fire or into water to drown him. So the father brought the boy to the disciples and asked them to cast the demon out, but they couldn't. Literally, the father says, "But they were not strong enough" (9:18).

And now we can imagine how the argument between the scribes and disciples broke out. The disciples were supposed to be able to cast demons out. They had done it before (6:13), but now they can't. So the scribes probably saw this as a good opportunity to accuse the disciples, and maybe Jesus himself, of being a hoax. They can't do what they claim to be able to do. Then the disciples would have tried to defend themselves, and that's the mess Jesus comes back to.

Jesus is apparently frustrated with the whole situation. He calls them faithless and asks them to bring the boy to him (9:19).

Then, as soon as the evil spirit sees Jesus, it convulses the boy and throws him on the ground. The demons know who Jesus is. But Jesus doesn't cast the demon out right away. He can see what's going on, and he knows what he has to do, but he talks with the father about it first. Jesus is fishing for something here. He had been before when he asked them, **"What are you arguing about?"** (9:16), and he's still fishing. So far, no one has actually asked Jesus to cast the demon out. The father had asked the disciples, and the situation had been explained to Jesus, but no one had asked Jesus to do anything yet. So Jesus keeps fishing with the father. He

asks him how long this had been happening. The father says, “From childhood” (9:21), and then he finally asks Jesus to do something, although his request was kind of weak. He says, “If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us” (9:22).

Now Jesus didn’t really like that word, “If.” He says, “**‘If you can’! All things are possible for one who believes.**” (9:23)

It’s a rebuke, but it’s fairly gentle, and it’s inviting. Then the father’s answer is just brilliant. He says, “I believe; help my unbelief” (9:24). This is the first golden detail. It’s the one about faith. The father is honest with Jesus. He realizes from Jesus’ rebuke that his request was weak, and his faith is weak. He believes Jesus can do something; that’s why he brought his son in the first place. So faith is there, but so are his doubts. So the father confesses his faith and also his weakness. He doesn’t try to be something he’s not. He’s just honest.

Now Jesus had just taught him about the power of faith when he said, “**All things are possible for one who believes.**” And we might grab on to a statement like that and try really hard to muster up enough faith, in order to get what we want. But that’s not right. You can’t muster up enough faith, and the father knows this. So he doesn’t try to muster up enough faith in order to satisfy Jesus. Instead of relying on his own faith to activate enough power to heal his son, he just bets everything on Jesus and says, “I believe; help my unbelief.”

We see from the father’s honest reply that faith is always mixed with doubt. And we all know this from our own experience too. We might be afraid to admit it, but we all know it. If you ever hear someone say that their faith never wavers, you haven’t really found a strong believer; what you’ve really found is a liar. We could pray, “I believe; help my unbelief,” every single day.

The thing about faith is that the power of faith doesn’t really depend on how much of it you have. The amount is irrelevant. And you can’t measure it anyways, so what’s the point? What matters is that it’s there, and what matters even more is the strength of the One you trust in. If you’re hanging by a rope, it doesn’t really matter how much faith you have in the rope. What really matters is the strength of the rope. If it’s worn down to a thread, you’re in trouble, even if you’re convinced it will hold. But if it’s a brand new climbing rope, and everything’s tied off right, you’re going to be fine, even if you’re freaking out.

And when this desperate father brought his demon possessed son to Jesus, it didn’t really matter how much faith the man had. The only thing that mattered was whether or not Jesus could cast the demon out.

The problem with our faith sometimes—and I’m talking about the content of our faith—is that we imagine God is a tyrant or some kind of greedy businessman who operates a miracle store, and in order to get a miracle, we have to have enough faith. So we think of faith as some kind of cosmic currency that we use to get stuff. But that’s just bonkers. God is no tyrant. And he’s never greedy. Of course he wants us to believe in him, but he doesn’t withhold good things until we have enough faith.

So Jesus casts the demon out, even though the father’s faith is weak. And the way Jesus does it is amazing. He said to the demon, “**You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again**” (9:25). This is the second golden detail. It’s the one about the power of Jesus’ Word. And it’s actually kind of funny. We just have to make sure we don’t skip over it too quickly. So imagine the text cuts off there, or that line is at the bottom of the

page and you haven't flipped it yet. You don't know what comes next. What's strange about what Jesus says to the demon? He's deaf; Jesus said so himself. The demon can't hear him, and yet, Jesus expects him to come out of the boy and never enter him again just because Jesus said so. And it works. The spirit convulsed the boy terribly and came out.

So what do we learn from this golden detail? We learn that Jesus' Words have power. They don't just communicate his authority; they carry his power. It's not like the demon heard Jesus' command and thought about it first. It's not like he weighed the consequences of obedience or disobedience and decided by his own free will to just give up and come out. It's not like that at all. The Word of Jesus literally forces the spirit out. Imagine Jesus' Words as spiritual ropes that come out of his mouth, tie up this evil spirit, and drag him out of the boy. The Word of Jesus is so powerful that deaf demons are constrained by its force.

Remember, this is the same Word that spoke the universe into existence. These Words create and dictate reality in both the physical and spiritual realms. These Words call people back to life again. They've done it before, and they will do it again. And this is the same Word that declares your sin to be forgiven.

When Jesus' Word of forgiveness comes to you, it carries his power of forgiveness with it. It carries the power of what he accomplished in his death and resurrection. It carries it from the cross to you, and it makes that forgiveness a reality in your life. It doesn't merely inform you of the possibility of forgiveness. Forgiveness isn't something you have to appropriate for yourself. The Word of Jesus effects forgiveness in your life. The power of the cross is carried to you by the Word of Jesus. This is why we care so much about preaching, and the absolution, and the reading of Scripture. It's because Jesus' Word doesn't just communicate information. Jesus' Word does stuff. It creates and dictates reality in both the physical and the spiritual realms. And that's because it is Jesus' Word. My words don't do that. Your words don't do that. But Jesus' Words do. So when I stand here and proclaim to you that your sins are forgiven, or when you proclaim to one another that your sins are forgiven, those words are powerful, not because we have spoken them, but because Jesus has commanded them to be spoken. They are not merely our words, they are Jesus' Words, and they carry all the divine power of Jesus himself. Remember this: the same powerful Word that called creation into existence and forced that evil Spirit out now declares your sin to be forgiven on account of Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus' powerful Word brings grace to you.

So that powerful Word forces the demon out of the boy. And later, when they're alone, the disciples ask Jesus why they couldn't cast it out. And Jesus answers, **"This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer"** (9:29). This is the third and final golden detail. It's the one about the power of prayer. And this one takes a little bit of thought too. Think about what Jesus says. What's strange about it? Jesus says, **"This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."** Now look back to when Jesus casted out the demon. Do you see it? Or maybe I should ask, *Do you see what's not there?* Jesus didn't pray. That's kind of funny, right?

We don't know a lot about demons—just bits and pieces here and there—but there are apparently different kinds, and this kind can only come out by prayer. But Jesus didn't pray. And this actually teaches us something very important about prayer. We learn that prayer doesn't actually have any power. We talk about the power of prayer, and rightly so, but prayer doesn't actually have any power in itself. And this should be obvious to us, but sometimes we get

confused about this, just like we get confused about the power of faith. The power of prayer really depends on the One we pray to. To say, **“This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer,”** simply means that Jesus is the only one who can do it. And that’s what we see in the text. No one else could do anything for the boy. Only Jesus could drive the demon out. And that’s why Jesus says, **“This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.”** It’s the same as Jesus saying, “You have to ask me to do it.”

Now there is one person in the text who prayed. You remember who it was? It was the boy’s father. And it wasn’t the greatest prayer either. Jesus even rebuked the guy for the weakness of his prayer. Never start your prayers with the words, “If you can.” That’s the wrong way to do it. But the effectiveness of our prayers does not depend on how good they are. The father’s prayer was weak and filled with doubt, but it worked to cast out the demon. That’s the prayer that did what the disciples could not do. And it wasn’t because the prayer was very good. It wasn’t because the prayer was powerful. The prayer was weak and filled with doubt, but it worked, because it was directed to the right person. And that’s what matters.

Sometimes you hear people say things like, “Prayer changes things.” But that’s not right. Prayer doesn’t change anything. God changes things, and that’s why we pray. He hears and answers because he is gracious and kind. Sometimes we think we need to have really great prayers. Or if we have something really big to ask for, we think we need to get a lot of people praying. It’s like the more people we have praying, the better chance we have of getting God to listen. But that’s not right. God hears and answers because he is gracious and kind, and he has granted us access through Jesus Christ. That’s all there is to it. A desperate father with a weak and doubt-filled prayer. And he was the only one praying. But he prayed to the right person.

Dear saints, we are given weak things: faith, words, prayer. Faith, in and of itself, amounts to nothing. Words, if they don’t have the power of the cross behind them, don’t do anything. And prayer, in and of itself, has no power. But none of these things stand alone. All of these things are connected to Jesus Christ, and when they are connected to Jesus Christ, they have his power. Faith in Jesus Christ is so powerful that it will carry us through death and into life, because the One we trust in, Jesus Christ, has promised to bring us with him. The words of the Gospel are powerful enough to drive away demons and bring salvation to those who hear and believe. And prayer ... Our powerful and gracious heavenly Father has invited us to bring our requests to him as beloved children, because his Son, Jesus Christ, has given us access through his cross.

Everything we have is weak. And that’s good, because it means the effectiveness of these things does not depend on us. It’s all about the power of Jesus. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.