

DEMONS, UNBELIEF, AND PRAYER

Mark 9:14-29

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

September 15, 2024

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 9, verses 14 through 29. Please stand as you are able for the gospel. 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.

Are you weak? Do you ever feel weak? And I specifically mean spiritually. Does your faith ever feel weak? Do your prayers ever feel weak? Mine do, quite often. And I'm betting yours do too. Do you know why we feel that way? It's because it's true. My faith feels weak, because it is. My prayers feel weak, because they are. I will always remember visiting with a woman on her deathbed. And she didn't want to die. We were talking about faith, and I don't remember what led her to say this, but she said, “I must not have enough faith.” And I said, “You're probably right.” I said more, but I won't tell you what, because it would give away the rest of the sermon before I get there. But I so appreciated this woman's honesty, because that is the experience of so many of us. We go through life feeling weak, because we are.

Occasionally I encounter someone who tells me that their faith is very strong. You may have encountered people like that as well. And, you know what? I hope that's true for them. If it is, maybe this sermon isn't for them. I suppose they don't need it. But for most of us, our faith is weak, and our prayers are weak. And I'm not going to tell you that's okay. But I do want to focus our attention on what our Lord Jesus does with a bruised reed or a faintly burning wick (Is. 42:3; Matt. 12:20).

This passage opens with Jesus and three of his disciples coming down from a mountain. Jesus had taken Peter, James, and John up there to show them something. And now they're coming back. It's such a marvelous passage. I can't think of another way to describe it than to say that it's just so interesting. The Bible is often like that, but we don't always recognize it, because we might read it too fast. This passage is a great example of how, sometimes, we need to just slow down and think about it for a while. Sometimes we read the Bible just to get through it. For example, you might set a goal to read through the Bible in a year, and that's a great thing to do. But that can make us read it just to get through it. But sometimes we also need to slow down and just live in it. It would be kind of like visiting a large museum and trying to see it all in an hour. You might see it all, but not really see any of it. So I'm not suggesting that you do less Bible reading. I'm suggesting that you do more. Read through the Bible in order to read through all of it. But also stop and think about one part of it. That way, you get to see the forest and the trees.

This passage is a great example of a place where we should stop and live in it for a moment. Because there are some little details that we might miss if we go too fast. But when we stop to look at them, I think we'll be glad we did.

Jesus and those three disciples had just come down from the mountain, and Jesus walks right into the middle of an argument. His other disciples had gotten into it with a crowd. When Jesus asks what it was all about, the father of this boy comes forward and lays it out for him. The boy has an evil spirit, or what we would commonly call a "demon." And this was a bad one. They're all bad, but this demon was especially bad. It made the boy mute. He couldn't talk. And it was also violent. It would throw him down, make him grind his teeth and foam at his mouth. It even cast him into fire and water to try to destroy him. The demon had such possession over the boy that it controlled his motor functions. Just try to imagine, if you can, how horrible this must have been for the boy. His body was trying to destroy him, and he had no control over it; something else did. Or try to imagine his father, keeping a close watch on the boy, because, at any moment, he might have to pull him out of a fire or a lake. Imagine living with that constant fear and the darkness of the demon's presence.

We still have demons. They don't usually behave that way anymore. Sometimes demons show off, but, most of the time, they're just slipping lies into our world. We know that every lie has its source in the devil. Jesus calls the devil the "the father of lies" (John 8:44). And, as the prince of demons, he uses them to do his evil work. Wherever he or his demons are, and whatever they are doing, we need to be alert that there are evil and unseen forces in the world. We need to be watchful, and, above all, we need to pray against them.

So this father brought his boy to the disciples. I suppose he probably wanted Jesus, but Jesus wasn't there yet. The disciples thought they would be able to cast the demon out. They had done it before (6:13), so why should this be any different? But they couldn't. Whatever they said or did before to cast out demons, it just didn't work on this one.

And we can imagine how this led to an argument. Jesus had critics. So when the disciples could not cast it out, it would have been a good opportunity for the critics to pounce. *You said you could cast out demons. You're a fraud.* Then, if you get accused of something like that, you probably snap back. That's how I picture the argument, anyway. The disciples couldn't do what they claimed to do, and tempers flared.

So Jesus comes and learns about the situation. He says, **"O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me"** (9:19). Jesus called them **"faithless."** He's not condemning them. He's rebuking them, but he's not condemning them. And there's a difference. There's a lack of faith here, and that's not okay, but he does not condemn them for it. To condemn them would be to send them away and refuse to help. Instead, it's a problem that Jesus needs to fix. We have this backward sometimes. We think that Jesus will turn us away for our lack of faith. But it's the opposite. He invites us in. So he tells them to bring the boy.

When the spirit saw Jesus it convulsed the boy, like it had at other times. It threw him to the ground, it made him foam at the mouth. The demons recognized Jesus. They knew who he is. Some demons spoke. At the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, there's a demon that sees Jesus and says, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God" (1:24). But this demon does not speak. It's mute, and from what Jesus says, it was also deaf. There are, apparently, different kinds of demons. This one is **"mute and deaf"** (9:25). And maybe that's why the disciples were unable to cast it out. Perhaps they said the right words to cast it out, but it couldn't hear, so it didn't leave.

And at this point, the father of the boy seems discouraged. He says, "If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us" (9:22).

Jesus took exception to the word "if." **"If you can"!** **All things are possible for one who believes"** (9:23). Here's a tip for you: don't ever start your prayers with, "If you can," because there is never any doubt about God's ability to do something. It is, sometimes, okay to start your prayers with, "If it be your will ...," because there are times when we do not know the will of God. And in those times, we should surrender ourselves to his will. So we might pray, "If it be your will, heal this sickness." But there are other times when we should drop the "If it be your will," and just pray what God has commanded us to pray, like "Give us our daily bread," or, "Forgive our sins." There are no "ifs" there. And we should never pray, "If you can ..."

So Jesus scolds this father, a little bit, for his "iffy" prayer. But it's not to condemn him. Jesus knows this father's heart, and he's trying to draw a true confession out of him. And he does. The father replies, and this is such a marvelous prayer. This is one that we should all keep in our hearts and pray often. "I believe; help my unbelief!" (9:24). That is truly a prayer of faith, because faith has no delusions about how strong we are. Faith knows how weak we are, and it looks to Jesus for help. If we ever think that our faith is strong—if we ever think that something in us is strong—well, then we really need to reexamine ourselves. Because faith never thinks of itself as strong. Delusion thinks of itself as strong. But faith only thinks of Jesus as strong.

So there's a lesson about faith in here for us. That father confesses his weakness. He's honest with Jesus. And we should always be honest in our prayers, because God knows our hearts even better than we do, and he welcomes us to come for help. And Jesus never turns aside the weak soul. The proud, he turns them aside, but never the weak soul. The father confessed his unbelief, and Jesus had mercy on him. He cast the demon out of his son. He gave him the first thing he asked for: to help his son. And he gave him the second thing he asked for: to help his unbelief.

Our faith may be weak. Our hearts are weak. But the power of faith is not in how strong it is. The power of faith is in the One we trust. You can trust in yourself, or in whatever other god you want. But that faith will not save you, no matter how strong it feels, because those gods are not capable of saving you. But if you trust in Jesus for your salvation, even if your faith is weak, you will be saved, because Jesus is capable of saving you.

There's also a lesson about prayer for us in here. And this is one where we might not notice it right away, but if we sit and meditate on this text, that is, if we just think about it for a while, it might show itself. Remember what Jesus said about this demon and why his disciples were not able to cast it out? He said, **"This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer"** (9:29). There's something a little bit odd about that. Do you see what it is? How did Jesus cast the demon out? Not by praying, but simply by commanding the unclean spirit. That's odd. Jesus said, **"This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer,"** but he did not pray. Why not? Well, because he's God. He's the one that we pray to, along with his Father and the Holy Spirit.

We talk about the power of prayer, and rightly so. Prayer is powerful. Prayer changes things. Why? Is it because our prayers are really strong? Is it because we get enough people praying that it accumulates enough power? No. Prayer is powerful, because the One we pray to is powerful. When Jesus says, **"This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer,"** that is the same as to say, *This kind cannot be driven out by anyone except me, so just ask me to do it.*

And then, by the power of his word, Jesus cast this demon out. And this, also, is fascinating. It's weird, but in a good way. Remember, the spirit was mute and deaf. And when Jesus says that, I don't think he just means that the demon refuses to talk or hear, but that it doesn't actually have the ability to speak or hear. I mean, that's what mute and deaf means, and that's what Jesus calls it. But he still casts it out by speaking to it. His words have the power to effect change in the physical and spiritual realms. It's the same Word that spoke at creation, saying, "Let there be ...," and there was. It's that same word that Jesus spoke to Lazarus or other dead people. Dead people are mute and deaf. But Jesus' Word brought them back to life. It's a special power of his Word, that it does not merely inform or persuade, but it does things in the physical and spiritual realms. The Word of Jesus is more powerful than a defibrillator or a bulldozer. He speaks to this deaf spirit, and it's like the words yank the spirit out. It's like a spiritual rodeo, where Jesus Word is like a lasso that ropes this demon and pulls him out of the boy. It's not magic; it's just the power of Jesus.

Now there is someone who prayed; it just wasn't Jesus. It was the boy's father. He prayed to Jesus, "If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." That's the prayer that drove the demon out. It was weak and faithless. But it was a powerful prayer for one simple reason: who it was directed to. Jesus even rebuked him for the weakness of his prayer, but he answered it anyway. That is the kind of God you have.

We are weak. Our faith is weak. Our prayers are weak. So be honest. Our Father in heaven knows our weakness. That's the whole reason he sent his Son to die for us. We're enslaved to sin and death and unbelief. He knows our weakness. And instead of casting us away, he calls us to come and seek his help. He invites us to confess our sins, and he forgives us for the sake of Jesus' blood. He invites us to cast all of our cares upon him. And he may not always give us what we want, or even what we think is best, but he will give you what you need. He will be merciful to you, always. His grace is sufficient for you. And he will protect you from the evil

DEMONS, UNBELIEF, AND PRAYER (Mark 9:14-29)

one. Weak faith is strong when it trusts in Jesus. And weak prayers are strong, when they are addressed to the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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