

Sermon: St. Mark 9:17-29

2-26-12 (Reminiscere, 2nd Sunday in Lent), Bethany-Princeton MN

JESUS EVEN ANSWERS PRAYERS THAT COME FROM WEAK, TREMBLING
FAITH, AND INSTEAD HE MAKES THE DEVILS SHAKE

Prayer: Lord, we believe; help our unbelief! Amen!

The Text, St. Mark 9:17-29. ¹⁷ Then one of the crowd answered and said, "Teacher, I brought You my son, who has a mute spirit. ¹⁸ And wherever it seizes him, it throws him down; he foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth, and becomes rigid. So I spoke to Your disciples, that they should cast it out, but they could not." ¹⁹ He answered him and said, "O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you? Bring him to Me." ²⁰ Then they brought him to Him. And when he saw Him, immediately the spirit convulsed him, and he fell on the ground and wallowed, foaming at the mouth. ²¹ So He asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. ²² And often he has thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him. But if You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." ²³ Jesus said to him, " 'If you can!' All things are possible to him who believes." ²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" ²⁵ When Jesus saw that the people came running together, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "Deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him and enter him no more!" ²⁶ Then the spirit cried out, convulsed him greatly, and came out of him. And he became as one dead, so that many said, "He is dead." ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. ²⁸ And when He had come into the house, His disciples asked Him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" ²⁹ So He said to them, "This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting." Lord, this is Your Word and these are Your words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

In the name of Jesus by whom we find, when we are weak, that we are strong:

In this story Jesus does not say, "*Great is your faith!*" to the person He is helping, as He says to the woman in today's gospel. Instead we meet a man who is unsure of himself. He is unsure of Jesus. He says, "**If You can do anything ...**" to Jesus. The man says, "**Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!**" He admits his lack of faith, that he does believe but he also doesn't believe, and he is not too sure

how this struggle within himself will end, if believing or not believing will win out. He says, **“Help!”**

This is a favorite Bible story because we have a lot in common with this man who has weak, trembling faith. You can relate to him, can't you? He is at the point *“when ev'ry earthly prop gives way”* (#197 v. 3). He is worn out with worrying for his son. The boy had been afflicted by this demon **“from childhood,”** so, for a number of years. Think of the way this father had been not only worrying, but hurting, for all those years as he saw the demon throw his boy into shaking fits that the father was powerless to stop, it even kept the boy from speaking, and often took advantage of this inability to cry out by trying to get the poor boy killed by fire or drowning when the father wasn't looking. And the father was probably filled with guilt too: since the Bible indicates that the devil doesn't just grab somebody out of the blue, but goes around seeking targets to devour, it makes us wonder how this boy had become a target for the devil: had his father been careless and negligent with his son's faith in some way, perhaps failing to bring his child to God's house, and provided an open door for the devil? So this father is worn out with parental guilt, worry, sadness, hurt, and helplessness.

But it's reached a new level, because he says to Jesus, **“I brought my son to You”** – but at the time Jesus was up on the mountain with Peter, James and John in His transfiguration, so the other nine disciples – all of whom Jesus had previously sent out preaching, and who had cast out *many* demons – tried to cast out this demon and *couldn't*. So this father is at a point where he might say it's all too much for his faith. We sympathize with him. Haven't you been there? Haven't you quoted that Bible verse to yourself about God not testing you or giving you more than you are able to bear, but frankly you think you've reached that point, and you say, “No more, God, my faith can't handle any more than this!” And just like this man is almost accusing Jesus of negligence – *“I brought my son*

to You, but ahem, You weren't here, You were busy elsewhere," in your frustration you have these unspoken accusations against God who seems to be somewhere else, or doing nothing about your problem, or silent, when you need Him the most.

We can sympathize with this man and his weak faith. I think what's amazing is that at this low point he admits it to Jesus. **"Help my unbelief!"** He calls it what it is. We are too good for that. The hardest thing for modern-day Americans is to admit weakness. And it seems too horrible to say, "I have unbelief in me."

I think it has to do with this thing we can't easily shake, which is a feeling that God listens to your prayers, He's pleased with you, gives you good things, because you've served Him so well, you've at least tried hard, you haven't gone against Him like others, or you've been basically faithful. You might think He'll only give to you if you just pray harder. Which is saying that before God you depend on your worthiness and what you do. It's "works righteousness." There's nowhere Lutherans pull this act more than on the subject of faith. We emphasize faith over works, but then we turn faith *into* a work! We turn faith into a burden, it's how much faith do you have or how sincerely do you believe? If your faith is weak or lacking, you might doubt God will answer your prayer.

That's why we need this Bible story! Didn't Jesus answer the man's prayer? **"Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, 'Deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him and enter him no more!' Then the spirit cried out, convulsed him greatly, and came out of him."** Once again we see that Jesus gave a command to a devil, and the devil had to obey the command to the letter. Jesus said, **"Come out of him,"** and it's obvious that the devil was very unwilling to do so, it cried out in rage and anger, not wanting to let go of its grasp and control over the boy, it **"convulsed him greatly,"** there was this great shaking that everyone saw the boy do, but it was the unclean spirit inside him doing it, but in the end, it **"came out of him,"** just like Jesus said. It had to obey Jesus.

So Jesus answered the man's prayer. This is what the man had been praying for years, he'd been praying it all the way coming to see Jesus, even when the disciples were having no success he was praying it, and now finally all these prayers were answered. See the happy end of his crosses and suffering! Nobody likes to go through this, and feel so desperate and weak, but it drove this man to Jesus, which is a good thing. God takes no pleasure in our suffering, but He loves it when you come to Him, and pray to Him, even just **"help my unbelief!"**

Drawing us closer to Him shows us one of God's purposes in allowing all this.

But notice how stupidly the man worded his prayer when he finally spoke to Jesus: **"If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us."** He isn't sure of Jesus. He doesn't say "if it is Your will," which is how we should pray; he says, **"if You can"** – betraying doubt that Jesus is omnipotent. But while we might criticize this, because we believe that God is all-powerful, don't you admit there are times when you doubt that He can or will help you? You know He has power to forgive sins, but don't you at times wonder if He really forgives your sins, or can forgive that sin? You know He's omnipresent, but He seems so far off or so silent. You too often lack confidence when you speak to Him. Sometimes we word our prayers stupidly too. You say the wrong thing, or pray with uncertain words. Don't you have this same **"if You can"** kind of faith that is so timid?

This is why it's so important to see that Jesus even answers a prayer that comes from weak, trembling faith. He doesn't answer prayers because of what your faith is like. He doesn't answer a single prayer because it comes from strong faith; nor is weak faith a virtue either. *He answers your prayers for Jesus' sake.* As we learn in the catechism, you are not worthy of anything you ask, neither have you deserved it. But He gives you every good thing by grace. He has compassion on you and helps you because He looks away from your sins, He chooses to not look at you or your life, and He looks at His Son, Jesus, whose faith was perfect.

You just cling to Jesus. You pray to the heavenly Father as His child, and you are His child by faith in Christ Jesus – not a certain kind or quality of faith, not faith that is strong or weak, but simply trust in Jesus that “*He is my Lord, who has redeemed me.*” The faith that matters most is Jesus’ faith. The only faith good enough is His faith. That’s the faith to rely on, that His faith counts for you as good enough for God and everything lacking in your faith is taken away. The Lord answers prayers from a weak, trembling faith, simply because you’ve been *given* faith in Jesus, so you get to benefit from all Jesus did as Savior. Included in this is that He purifies your prayers too. By Jesus’ blood everything is purified, any sin or wrong thoughts or wrongly worded stuff in your prayers is taken away and all God hears in your prayers is perfect, good and right for Jesus’ sake.

And while Jesus is calming your weak trembling faith and making it stronger, this story shows that at the same time He is making the devil shake. The devil is angry that the Lord answers your prayers by grace. The devil is enraged when the Lord gives you the faith to trust more in Him and less in yourself. Did you catch in this story that Jesus’ merely being present was enough to do this? They brought the boy to Jesus, and St. Mark says, “**when he**” – that is, the demon – “**saw Him [Jesus], immediately the spirit convulsed him.**”

When you are in Jesus’ presence, you have access to this power of Jesus over the devil, the power of His real presence in His Word and the power of His real presence in the Lord’s Supper when He takes away your sins and even comes into you as you eat and drink with faith. It makes the devil shake in fear of Jesus and in hatred of Him. But you are made stronger, you stop trembling in your faith, the more Jesus is with you, exercising His power over the devil for you. All the more reason to be brought to Him repeatedly, even when your faith is weak and trembling – especially then – for Him to *help* your unbelief. Amen!