

Belief and Unbelief
Mark 9:14-29
September 19, 2021
First Presbyterian, Luling

Early this week, I sat down to tackle the lectionary passage for today. I noticed we had jumped forward in Mark a little bit, so I checked to see what we were skipping over. The Transfiguration story, which we've already covered earlier in the year, just before Lent. As Peter, James, and John are coming down from that literal mountaintop experience with Jesus, this is what they encounter. And I'm sad to say that the lectionary just skips this story, and I think it's an important passage. So we're going to take a look at it this morning.

The three disciples and Jesus are returning to wherever the rest of the disciples had been waiting for them. There's a crowd, some scribes, and the disciples, and everyone is kind of stirred up. Once Jesus appears on the scene, he has everyone's immediate attention. It seems that a father has brought his son to the disciples, because he needed an unclean spirit cast out. The spirit left the son unable to speak, caused him to have seizures, put him in danger. The disciples had tried to cast it out but had not been able to do so.

Now, before we think the disciples were maybe getting too big for their britches by trying to cast out unclean spirits, we need to backtrack just a bit in Mark, to chapter 6, where Jesus sends the disciples out two by two. And one of the things he gives them is authority over unclean spirits. While they are out, Mark tells us they cast out many demons as well as healed many people. So they've been able to do it before, but they can't do it this time.

Jesus arrives on the scene, hears from the boy's father that this has happened, or rather, that the disciples haven't been able to make anything happen, then Jesus grumbles about this "faithless generation." This grumbling puts Jesus squarely in the tradition of the Old Testament. In the introduction to the story of Noah, God finds that Noah is the only righteous person out of his entire generation (Gen 7:1). And later on, at the end of Deuteronomy, in Moses' song, he sings of the perverse generation, the faithless, who wandered in the wilderness and complained and grumbled and questioned God throughout those years.

These Old Testament references lean toward defining "faithless" as "not trusting God." Just file that away and we'll come back to it in a couple minutes.

The boy is brought to Jesus, the unclean spirit goes into action. There's

some more conversation with Jesus and the father, which he concludes with “if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.” Jesus responds “If you are able!” with the implication that of course he is able to do something. And then he says “All things can be done for the one who believes.” “Believes” there is the same root as “faithless.” So it could say “All things can be done for the one who has faith, or is faithful.”

The next verse is what grabs me every time I read it. The father cries out—a verb that can also mean shriek, so it signifies a deep anguish. Then he says “I believe, help my unbelief.” Again, believe and unbelief are the same “faith” root. I have faith; help my faithlessness. Or I have faith; help me when I do not.

This is the cry of the father’s heart. And ours. He believes. He has faith. In what? In Jesus, in the power of Jesus to cast out the spirit that torments his son. But is his belief, his faith, enough? How does he even measure that? There is a tiny bit of doubt, of unbelief, of lack of trust, of faithlessness, in him too. He’s just seen Jesus’s disciples be unable to help his son. What if their teacher can’t do any better? Is his unbelief too great? Will it cause him to not measure up to standard? How much unbelief is too much? How much unbelief does it take to counteract the faith he does have? All of these thoughts and calculations must have rushed through his mind, as he blurted out the whole truth to Jesus. I believe. Help my unbelief.

I’m pretty sure I’ve said this to y’all before, but English does us no favors here. Because there is no English verb for “faith,” like there is in Greek. So most of the time the faith verb gets translated as it does here—as belief. But faith is bigger than belief, bigger than just a thinking thing, an idea thing, an intellectual acceptance of an idea. That Old Testament concept of faithlessness as a lack of trust in God, or the flip side of faith as trust, gets pretty close. But belief needs to be in there too. Maybe belief plus trust.

Often, when we share the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, my mind goes to this idea of believing and faith-ing and trusting. The traditional invitation to the sacrament contains this line “Our Savior invites those who trust him to share the feast he has prepared.” I often modify that a bit—I say something like Jesus invites all who trust him, whether that trust today is a lot or a little, whether it comes easily or is difficult, Jesus invites all who trust him to come and share in this feast.” Because it seems to me that even as we believe, we also disbelieve. And even as we have faith, it is accompanied by faithlessness. Even as we trust, we doubt that we trust enough.

I’m pretty sure that faith is one of those things that God does not measure

in the same way we do. I'm pretty sure that there isn't a divine scale, with our faith piled up on one side and our faithlessness piled up on the other, and the faith side has to be heavier than the faithlessness side. I'm pretty sure even our most feeble efforts at faith and trust and belief count for a lot. That's how God's grace sees us.

Jesus heals the boy, casts out the unclean spirit. Mark doesn't tell us the boy's reaction, nor his dad's. How grateful he must have been, and relieved, that his faith had outweighed his faithlessness, in the compassionate and grace-filled eyes of Jesus.

I believe. Help my unbelief. We believe. Help our unbelief. We trust. Help our lack of trust. In that same compassion and grace, God does. God welcomes and accepts our tee-niniest bit of faith and helps and heals and transforms where we are lacking in faith.