

## **Sermon by Allan McNicol**

### **I Believe – Help my Unbelief!**

#### **Mark 9:14-29**

He had worked hard for a long time on this strip of land that he had inherited from his family. In good years the thin soil on the limestone hills had just enough moisture to produce a fair harvest of olives and grapes. And the deeper soil in the little valley could always be counted upon for its bounty of wheat and barley. Life was hard but tolerable.

Settled into a routine in Northern Galilee it was now time for the family to expand. And it wasn't long before God blessed them with a son. Those early days were memorable. Many were the times when mother and father would come to the crude crib and gaze upon their boy: their precious son. As darkness fell upon that little one-room house the parents wondered: What sort of a future was in store for him? Would he make his family proud?

But as the days passed something deeply troubling began to make its presence felt. That precious little boy would burst into hysterical fits foaming at the mouth. They never knew when it would be. Sometimes he nearly fell into the open fire or in the nearby well. Some of the neighbors started to whisper, "He is moonstruck!" The Rabbi came by and sought to console. His verdict: "An evil spirit!"

### **The Teacher**

Word began to spread around the hill country of the Galilee. There is a teacher from Nazareth and Capernaum who is doing mighty things. Some are even saying that when he speaks it's as though the angels come down from heaven. Surely, God is with him. The distraught father began to listen. "I will go and take my son to him. I have heard he is a healer too! He is said to have authority over the evil spirits."

The day comes. They set out to find the Teacher. Word is that he is north of the Sea of Galilee. Carefully they wind their way around the lake until they come to the foot of a mountain. All of a sudden it is chaos. Crowds of people were gathering all over the place. Learned scribes were disputing with what appeared to be disciples of the Teacher. They were arguing about his power and authority. The father tentatively approaches the disciples. "Can you help my son?" Some of them try but nothing happens. Total frustration.

Then a roar comes from one of the crowds. The Teacher is here. The distraught and chastened father perceives this is his last chance. He gets the eye of the Teacher. "I brought my boy to your disciples for healing but they could not do it. They seemed to have no power. They were not strong enough."

### **The Encounter**

Drained and tired from what took place on the mountain the Teacher is not looking for new challenges. Surveying the scene he echoes the words of Moses who also came down

from the mount to a scene of disarray (Deut 32:5). “O unfaithful and perverse generation where is faith at this time? Very well, bring the boy to me.”

There is something odd here. We would expect that Jesus would go directly to the boy. But that is not what happened. For the next four long verses (only in Mark) for all intents and purposes the boy is on the ground still writhing under the influence of the evil power (Mk 9:21-25). Instead, what happens is that we overhear a conversation between Jesus and the father. Mark thought that was important for his readers. I consider it is just as important for us today.

### **The Real Issue**

What is at issue? I think it is this: “Where is the real power? Can anyone help in situations like these?” This was not only a problem for a distraught father. Haven’t you and I been there as well? How can we maintain hope when some things seem so hopeless – when we find faith and trust is ebbing away?

These verses start off innocently enough. Like a good doctor Jesus asks the father to rehearse the boy’s condition; and the father is only too glad to comply. Mark loves to give these extensive accounts of dire situations in which people who encounter Jesus find themselves in apparent hopeless situations. Think of the Gerasene demoniac or the woman with the condition of perpetual bleeding. Now Jesus is face to face with another crisis – so many times he is challenged by radical evil.

But now the crucial request. (There is always one of those isn’t there!) Presupposing the disappointing failure of the disciples to get results the concerned father again beseeches Jesus, “If you can do anything, be moved with compassion and help us!” Here we have it all. The panic of a parent. The cry of bitter disappointment (I have traveled all day and it has come down to this!) Oh yes, it is not only the center of Mark’s story; it is also our story. We too are the recipients of cruel disappointments. We have hit bottom in these situations. “If you can do anything... .” It sounds like a reasonable plea.

Oh, but when we think about it there is irony here! The word of the father is addressed to the one who is connected to the ultimate power – power over the unseen world, life and death. That is clear from anyone who has read the Markan story so far! No wonder Jesus is startled at such a response. Did I hear it right; “If I can? Don’t you know, all things are possible for the one who believes?”

This is hard. We are in the grip of hyperbole. When we hear in the Bible these words we think of God. In the OT Greek Bible in Genesis 18:14 Sarah and Abraham learn that despite their extended age the word they are to have a son is true. “Nothing is impossible with God.” But here the focus shifts. This is the promise to or for “the one who believes.” When we venture out of the comfort zone of our own limitations into God’s new world it is a different set of affairs. There are other possibilities for the one who believes. Jesus knew that.

Somewhere in here the light begins to come on. The father gets it. He cries out (some of the manuscripts in Mark add “with tears”), “I believe, please help my lack of belief.”

Faith as trust is the very center of it all. Remember, even Jesus, in the face of devastating unbelief in his own home town, could do no mighty work there (Mk 6:5-6). The people were not prepared to loose their shackles and take that difficult step into God's world. But the father did. Despite his own lack of certainty and immaturity he made the step. And astonishing things were about to happen.

In Matthew's account of this incident he follows it immediately (Matt 17:20) with a reference to faith "as a grain of mustard seed" that is able "to remove the mountain." To the insightful reader of this time the removal of the mountain was an echo of Mount Zion. There are promises in the prophets that at the end of the age Mount Zion was to be reshaped to allow the faithful to arrive easily in Jerusalem to enjoy the glories of the messianic era. Stepping into the zone of surrendering to God's claim over us opens up an entirely new world! The father's faith was flimsy – as fragile as a grain of mustard seed; but it was genuine. Astonishing things were about to happen. In the presence of so much absent faith a ray of hope pierced the gloom and reached the heavens. As people come running to see what is happening, at last, someone had spoken the truth: "I believe."

It made the difference then and it makes the difference today. Jesus moves into action. The evil is rebuked and routed. It is almost a replay of the earlier incident with Jairus' daughter. Like the little girl, here the boy appears to be dead. Many of the people there thought as much. But our God is a God of the living. Although the translation is awkward, it is worth noting that two of the important words for resurrection in the Bible are used: Jesus *lifted him up* and he *was raised*.

Several decades ago when the movie "*The Exorcist*" came out I was teaching at the University of Texas. Almost daily a number of students would come by my office seeking assurance that they or someone whom they loved were or would not be possessed by an evil power. I reminded them that was a real concern even in Jesus' day. But the early Christians had an answer. At their baptism they made a pledge to renounce Satan; and through the power of their death and resurrection in baptism evil no longer had authority over them. Jesus has broken that power. It remains broken for all who make the confession, "I believe."

### **The Disciples' Query**

Of course, "unfaith" was not routed on that day. According to Mark, one of Jesus' frequent customs after these draining episodes was to go into a house with those who were close to him. Here Jesus and the disciples get together. Wouldn't we love to be like the proverbial fly on the wall and listen in to what was taking place? The disciples are upset. They say to Jesus, "You invested us with your power and yet we couldn't heal the boy."

Generations have puzzled over Jesus' answer. "With this kind nothing works but prayer." I think that here prayer functions as a synonym for trusting faith. It is nothing else but stubborn, unyielding trust in the Father above that Jesus seeks.

Jaroslav Pelikan used to tell us, "You can understand what a theologian really believes when you read what he says about prayer." What finally is prayer? Nothing but

unyielding faith! Later copyists of the text of Mark added “fasting.” By this time there were some who were deluded into thinking that Jesus was advocating some kind of technique for the exorcists. But that unknown father and the early church saw it differently. In the face of ridicule and persecution they held firm in the core truth, “I believe Jesus has defeated the evil powers.” That is the essence of prayer.

### **Conclusion**

It was now late in the day. Hand in hand the father and son set out to make the long trek back home around the lake. In Galilee when the sun sets it is quickly dark. It was a day that the father would never forget. But it is no more momentous than when we stand before others and make the confession, “I believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

AJM/rk  
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