

FAITH HEALING: BELIEF AND UNBELIEF

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Mark 9:14-29

One of my favorite children's books that I used to read to my daughter was called *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. The story is about one day in the life of a boy named Alexander, and indeed it was a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. Alexander woke up with gum in his hair. At breakfast his brothers got the toys out of the cereal boxes and he didn't get anything. Riding to school he had to sit in the middle. At school he forgot the number 16, his best friend declared they weren't best friends anymore, and after school he had to go to the dentist and had a cavity. And so on. It's a fun book that teaches kids that some days just aren't going to be perfect.

Our scripture reading for today could also be called "The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day" passage. Why? Because every person in the story is having that kind of day. People are arguing, a child is sick, the disciples can't disciple, and even Jesus appears to lose his cool. That's the sort of day it was.

The day actually begins (before our reading) with Peter, James, and John accompanying Jesus up a mountain. On top of the mountain, Jesus changes—he is transfigured. Moses and Elijah appear alongside him. God speaks. If there ever was a mountaintop experience, this would be it. They are on the mountain in the presence of God as well as heroes of their faith. It is wondrous.

But you can't remain on top of the mountain forever, and Peter, James, and John and Jesus head back down. Their descent brings them from the transcendence of the mountaintop to the distress and desperation of everyday life. This is where our reading for today picks up.

Jesus and the three disciples come down the mountain and find the other disciples surrounded by a crowd of people. There are also scribes present and they are arguing with the disciples. It is a chaotic scene. Jesus asks what is going on and a man from the crowd steps forward. He tells Jesus that he brought his son to Jesus because his son is possessed by a spirit which harms him. Since Jesus was not present (he was up on the mountain), the man asked the disciples if they could exorcise the spirit from his child. The disciples attempted to do this but they failed. Subsequently, the scribes were likely accusing the disciples of being frauds because of this failure. The disciples were having a no good, very bad day.

From the father's description of the boy's condition, it is clear that he suffers from epilepsy. In that day there was no treatment and no cure. For all practical purposes, the boy may as well have been possessed by an actual demonic spirit. The seizures were frequent. They caused the boy to fall into the fire and fall into the

lake. Can you imagine the constant stress and terror the parents experienced? This fire was not an enclosed fire in a fireplace like we have in our homes. This fire would have been the open cooking fire in the center of the house. It would have been kept burning 24/7. The parents would never know when their son might go into a seizure and be thrown into the burning fire. As parents, they were completely unable to help their child. They must have been consumed with frustration and helplessness. In desperation, the father came looking for Jesus but found only his disciples and they could not help his son. His day, like every day, was a no good, very bad day.

When the father tells Jesus what has happened, Jesus expresses his own frustrations—not with the father—but with everyone there. Jesus knows that the solution to this situation—to healing the boy—is faith. But faith is in short supply. Jesus says to the crowd, *You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you?* Jesus calls for the boy to be brought to him. The father says to Jesus, *If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.*

Did you hear that question the father asked? *If you are able?* He questions Jesus' authority. Remember, the man brought his son looking for Jesus. No doubt he had heard that this rabbi could work miracles. When the disciples couldn't heal the boy, the father's confidence in all of them—including Jesus—evaporates. He says, *If you are able?*

Jesus takes the father's words and turns them back on him saying, *If you are able. If you are able, if you believe, then all things are possible.* Jesus is telling him, "It is not about me. It is about you and your belief."

And the father understands. He gets it. With Jesus present, he has his own mountaintop epiphany. He realizes that his own faith is thin—too thin, too weak, and too misplaced. And he makes one of the most heartfelt declarations of faith that we find in scripture. He cries out, *I believe; help my unbelief.*

Jesus calls the spirit out of the boy and the boy is healed.

Later on, Jesus and the disciples are alone, and they ask Jesus why they had failed in casting out the spirit. Jesus tells them, *This kind can come out only through prayer.*

During this season of Lent, I have been preaching this series of sermons that I have called Faith Healing. Through stories of healing that we find throughout scripture I have been asking what we can learn from them. I've asked you to consider the season of Lent as a forty-day journey of healing that can take us from the bottom of the mountain where we are having our own very bad, no good day all the way up to the divine healing of the resurrection, to a glorious day.

One thing we have seen here is that being healed does not necessarily depend on one's faith. In the story of the paralyzed man who was lowered through the roof, Jesus healed this person on the strength of the faith of his friends—the ones who brought him. When Elijah healed the foreign general Naaman, Naaman did not recognize the God of Israel. It was only through the faith of his slaves and servants that led him along towards believing.

In our reading for today, healing comes through the faith of the father. As we see throughout scripture, is often not the faith of the broken, but the faith of those around them that brings change. And that is good, because when a person is broken and in the depths of despair, faith can be hard to find. To have someone stand with us—to believe for us—is a blessing.

So, I ask you this, if we have faith, do really possess the power to heal? No. No we don't. With faith, what we possess is the connection to call on God's power to bring healing into our world.

And to have this faith, one must embrace humility. If we declare 'I have faith therefore I have power' then we don't truly have faith. The only faith we have is in ourselves. That was the disciples' problem. They believed the power lay with them, and when Jesus was absent, their 'power' was, too. They had lost their connection to God.

Think about our cell phones (Warning: this is a tortured metaphor). If your phone has a camera then it almost certainly has two cameras. There is a camera on the back for taking pictures of things out there. But slide your finger across the screen and the phone switches to the camera on the front. And what is that camera designed for? Selfies! Pictures of ourselves.

We always possess the ability to connect with God, but the connection fails because we are in selfie mode. We are more interested in ourselves. Our faith is in ourselves. Authentic faith demands the humility to exit selfie mode and focus on the world. When we can do that, when we can set our pride aside, when we can become humble disciples of Christ, then God's power will flow through us into our broken world.

When the father cried *I believe; help my unbelief*, he flipped the switch and recognized that the faith he possessed was weak. It was still faith and it was sufficient. Remember Jesus' words about faith and mustard seeds, *If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you* (Matthew 17:20).

Finally, the disciples ask Jesus why they were unable to remove the spirit and Jesus explains, *This kind can come out only through prayer*. This does not mean that we need to pray louder. Instead, it means we must pray with humility. The

type of prayer needed is the prayer that recognizes our reliance on God, the prayer that turns off selfie mode, the prayer that takes the power away from us and our belief in ourselves and directs it towards others. It is the prayer that confesses that we are imperfect and that we need God.

Over the past couple of years, our congregation has been involved with Compassionate Hands. As we have discovered in this time there are a large number of homeless people in Wilson County. We are working with Compassionate Hands not just to get these men and women off the street, but to bring the healing that changes lives, that changes a system, that eradicates injustice and replaces it with love, to ultimately bring a healing that enables us all to become citizens of God's realm.

Now, what if we tackled the homeless issue by just jumping in armed only with our good intentions and the power of our Christian conviction to fix things. It likely wouldn't work. We would be defeated by our arrogance. We would take selfies; we would fail. The result would be a bad day for everyone.

But, what if we approached this issue of homelessness (or any other need in our community) with a true humility of spirit, cognizant of our weakness and prayerfully asking God for guidance? What would happen? I don't know, but it would be a glorious day for all.