

Mark 9:14-29

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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Faith and Doubt

The Word of the Lord from Mark 9:23: Jesus said, "All things are possible for one who believes." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

All things are possible for one who believes. That's what Jesus says the father in our text.

Jesus has been away, with Peter, James and John; and when they join the other disciples, they find an agitated crowd. When Jesus asks the reason for the arguing, one responds and says, "Teacher, I brought my son to You, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. 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."

That explains it. After all, the disciples have performed miracles in Jesus' name before. Back in Mark 6, Jesus sent them out with authority to preach and work wonders, and they did. This time they fail, though, and so the arguments begin. The questions could be many and varied: Why can't the disciples cast out this demon? Are they doing it wrong? Are some demons more resistant, maybe stronger than Jesus? Is Jesus running low on the power to heal, past His prime? What has gone wrong?

Of course, Jesus isn't the problem. He identifies the problem when He says, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?"

The people are faithless, says Jesus. Whatever they've concluded in their arguments, it hasn't been, "We trust that this is all according to God's plan, and that Jesus knows what He's doing." The Lord sorrows over this, but He isn't fazed. He knows He's dealing with sinners. He's come to save sinners.

He commands that the boy be brought to Him: and brought near to the holy Son of God, the unclean spirit convulses the boy. Jesus asks the father, "How long has this been happening to him?", and the father replies, "From childhood. 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."

"If you can do anything." There's the problem – there's the doubt, the lack of faith. I'm guessing that the father is voicing what everybody else has been arguing: Is Jesus' power limited? Are there some evils too big for Him? This is a big question, because *if He's not almighty, then He's not the Son of God after all.*

Jesus' words cut clean to the problem as He says to the father, "'If you can't? All things are possible for one who believes."

In the next moment, the father speaks and becomes one of my favorite people in the Bible with this extraordinary statement of truth. He says, "I believe; help my unbelief!" Beautiful. It's an honesty tempered by suffering: his son has been afflicted for a long time, and it's tough to believe in a gracious God when your kid is sick. It hardly helps when Jesus' disciples haven't been able to heal him either!

As the crowd grows around them, Jesus disproves the doubt. He tells the spirit to get lost, and it does. The boy appears dead, but Jesus takes him by the hand and helps him up.

It really is amazing: after who-knows-how-long the people have been arguing about whether or not Jesus has still got what it takes, Jesus sends the demon away with a few words and then raises the dead with a touch of His hand.

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What shall we draw from this text today? Two things, I think.

First, we look at Jesus' words, "All things are possible for one who believes." That's a quote that gets misused a lot, because every sinful nature automatically wants to make that about us. Thus you get the standard sermon of the televangelist, along the lines of, "Jesus says that all things are possible for the one who believes. Therefore, if you believe enough, you can have whatever you want. If you don't get it, then that means that you don't have enough faith." From there, far too often, the list of "whatever you want" examples is very heavy on health, wealth and prosperity in this life, as in, "If you want that private jet, God will give it to you if you have enough faith, because Jesus says that 'all things are possible for one who believes.'" Such a teaching is unredeemable. It's blasphemy.

All things are possible for one who believes, says Jesus. The one who believes is the one who has faith, yes? And faith is a gift of God, yes? So what does faith pray?

Faith always prays, "Lord, Your will be done." Faith moves you to repentance, to pray, "I confess, O Lord, that, in my sin, I want all sorts of things that go against Your will." Faith always prays, "I trust, O Lord, that You are working all things for my good, even when I have no idea what You're doing."

Faith never wants God's will *not* to be done. Faith *never* prays, "O Lord, You are My servant, so give me what I want." There couldn't be a prayer less faith-filled than such a thing.

Here is the part that really annoys your sinful nature: If you want something that is not part of God's will – if you demand what God does not desire, then you are no longer praying by faith. And if you are not praying by faith, then there is no longer the promise that all things are possible. Your sinful flesh hates this, because it wants Jesus to do your bidding. It will do its best to foster resentment in your heart so that you don't believe the Word anymore, and so that you miss all the impossible things that God has done for you: like, for instance, creating you in the first place; or getting rid of your sin without destroying you in the process; or, say, raising you from the dead to everlasting life.

Faith always prays, "Your will be done." Even when the boy isn't healed by the disciples and faith has to wait for as long as Jesus delays to deliver (while the world yammers that Jesus must not be able to help), faith still prays, "Your will be done." It is not impatient. It does not demand. It does not accuse God of wrongdoing. It trusts. It has good reason to: if God has already given His Son to shed His blood for your sin, why would He not work all things for your good now?

The other thing for today is the father's marvelous confession, "I believe; help my unbelief!"

See, there's a bad idea floating around that says that faith and doubt are an either/or: if you have faith, then you have no doubt; and if you have doubts, then you have no faith. If that is true, then it follows that you can only count on God to help you when you have no doubts, because only then do you have faith. And if that is true, then it follows that God won't help you overcome your doubts because you don't believe in Him yet. And if *that* is true, then it follows that the only way to get faith is for you to overcome all your doubts. It's up to you: once you stop doubting, then you can finally believe.

Against that big stinky pile of despair, I present to you the father of Mark 9. He believes, and yet he doubts, and this should surprise us not at all. You live every day as a baptized Christian to whom God has given faith; and every day, seeing that holiness as a bullseye, the devil targets you and says, "Did

God really say?' Did God really say that you're forgiven? Did He really say to endure affliction or hardship or a difficult household and trust in His grace? Did He really say that sin would be bad for you – bad for most people, sure, but bad *for you*? Did God really say that He will hear your prayers and deliver you?" The devil's temptations always include doubt, because he's warring against your faith: and as long as you've got a sinful nature in this world, it's going to want to cooperate.

In other words, as long as you are both saint and sinner, you will always have faith and doubt. Those doubts are not the same as unbelief that rejects Jesus; but left to fester, they'll grow into unbelief.

Beware! The great temptation will be for you to say, "I must overcome my doubts in order to please God." For instance, "Before I ask God to heal me of this disease, I'd better put away all my doubts and believe that He will with my whole heart." It sounds right, but it's not. Doubt is a sin, right? And you know better than to say, "I must overcome my sins to please God." You can't overcome your sins, which is why you confess them and ask for forgiveness. Likewise, you can't overcome your doubts, either. That's why you follow the father's lead in our text and confess them to the Lord: because along with all of your other sins, Jesus bore all of your doubts to the cross. He paid the price for them there. He doesn't say, "You'd better stop doubting before I help you." Instead, He says, "I forgive you for your doubt, and I will help you through your doubt. You can count on My mercy."

Rejoice, my friends. The same Lord who forgives your sins also hears your prayers. Confess your doubts with the rest of your sins, and rejoice in His grace. Commend all your worries and cares to the Lord, praying, "Your will be done;" for the One who has already shed His blood for you will work all things for your good. In Him, nothing is impossible: He will accomplish what is best for you in His time and according to His will. This is most certainly true, because this part of His will you know is yours already: redeemed by His holy, precious blood, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen