

SERMON FOR SAT. & SUN. SEPT. 26,27, 2009

Lessons: Isaiah 50: 4-10, James 3: 1-12, Mark 9: 14-29 vs. 24 'I believe; help my unbelief!'

Introduction

'I believe! I don't believe!' Which is it? Are you ever caught in that crisis or that tension of faith? Or am I all alone? Yes, me, a man of faith I question my faith, even feel as if I may have lost my faith. I doubt by faith at times. Faith, you see, is never static, that is, faith either grows stronger or it becomes weaker. But faith never stands still. Where is your faith right now on a scale of 1 to 10? 10 being extra certain, extra strong, extra confident. 1 being extra weak, extra wobbly, on the brink of losing it. The strength or the weakness of faith depends a lot on life's circumstances it seems. As we pray with the father in our Gospel lesson, Mark 9: **'I BELIEVE! BUT, HELP MY UNBELIEF!'** And that is what I want to talk to you about a little bit today.

I.

In our Gospel lesson we meet a father. He loves his son, his boy. But the boy is severely disabled. The boy is afflicted from growing up normally, from having friends, from just having fun like other kids. The boy was tormented, overtaken, dominated by his affliction.

We live 15-20 minutes from one of the world's finest clinics and hospitals, equipped with advanced technology and medications and research. Many of you or at least someone you know are part of this Mayo Clinic system which we are so blessed with. But, for the Dad and his boy in our lesson no such help was available.

But, this Dad had heard about Jesus. Jesus was very well known by this time in His earthly ministry. However, Jesus was away in the mountains when the events of our lesson began to take place. A group of Jesus' disciples, however, were in the village when this Dad brings his boy to them for healing. But, they couldn't do anything for them. Frustrated and disappointed this Dad was losing hope, losing faith, losing grip.

He couldn't grasp what was going on with his boy. Everything was out of control for them. His son would never be normal. There seemed no where to turn. Have you ever been at that point for some reason, I have been. It's at this point of desperation for the Dad and his son, Jesus returns from His mountain trip. This Dad is at his wits end, he cries out, he prays so to speak: 'I believe; but, help my unbelief'.

Any of us, which if we're in the least bit honest, is all of us who've been at that point in life, can empathize with this poor Dad. Your heart has to break for this Dad. Your heart bleeds for this Dad. One of the worse things as a parent is to see your child suffer and there doesn't seem to be anything you can do

about it. It's like a demon that plagues you and we all have our demons at times for a lot of different reasons and life's circumstances.

II.

Failed faith, lost faith is a scary thing and it can take many different forms in our lives. For example, failed faith can be very blatant, very obvious. Such as **Psalm 10 says 'The proud do not seek God, in their pride there is no room for God'**. Well, that's just plain out and out unbelief due to personal pride = me, myself and I.

But, for most people though, failed faith, lost faith isn't so easily identified and labeled as prideful unbelief. For most of us failed faith, lost faith can be much more latent, more sneaky, more sinister like that demon that over whelms you.

Failed faith, lost faith is no respecter of persons, either. It shows no favoritism. Even the Apostle Paul felt this temptation to loose his faith, **1 Corinthians 9 'After I have preached to others, I pray I myself will not be disqualified from the prize'**.

There's a story I came across while preparing my message for today, about a Lutheran Pastor who gave a shocking testimony to his family and friends at his bedside before he died. As the story goes he had been a Pastor and Teacher in the Church for 30 plus years, not unlike me. I think that's why this story grabbed my attention. To all outward appearances, he had been faithful to his calling, he did all the expectations of a Pastor and Teacher, he preached his sermons, he taught his classes, he comforted the sick and dying and suffering, he led his congregation in ministry and mission. And yet on his death bed to the shock of his family and friends he said, 'Over the years I have lost my faith, it has failed me and I don't believe any of it'. I was just the other day telling my wife Sharon that's a frightening real possibility in my own heart and life. I'm afraid I've lost my faith.

Failed faith, lost faith can take the form of apathy, spiritual indifference 'kay sa rah, so rah, what will be will be'. That's not faith. Because true faith has an object is objective. 'What will be will be' is skepticism and cynicism. Which like a demon can take over and possess a person's heart and soul. The bottom line is that unbelief can happen to absolutely anyone, even to those of us who appear so sincere in our belief. But, burdened by a heavy cross in life and we all drag them around in some form or other, we can become just plain tired, just plain weary, just plain wore out of trying to believe when that illness or that condition or that circumstance or that situation which like a demon haunts you and just doesn't get better, even seems to get worse. I know I pray many times: 'I believe! But, help my unbelief!'

II.

As Jesus returns from His mountain-trip in our lesson, His disciples are in a heated discussion. They are arguing with some scribes, we're told. As a matter-of-fact, Jesus' disciples were under attack because

they couldn't help this boy and his Dad. After all, Jesus had empowered them to cast out demons. **Mark 6**, just a few chapters before our lesson, says, '**Calling the 12 to Himself, Jesus sent them out 2x2 and gave them authority over evil spirits**'. But, they had failed to do the job with this Dad and his son. Then Jesus arrives. The crowds go wild, so to speak. Jesus basically asks, 'what's all the fuss about?' And from the crowd comes the Dad's voice, '**I asked Your disciples to cast the demon out but they can't ... but if You can?**' And there's the tiny seed of a failed faith, there's the minute crack in the wall of a weakening and lost faith = '**if**'.

Jesus admonishes the whole bunch of them through His disciples, who you see had been relying on their own prowess, their own ability, their position as being Jesus' disciples to get this job done. '**O faithless generation**' Jesus chides '**Bring the boy to ME**', to Jesus. And there is the object of our strengthening faith, it's Jesus. And there is no **if's** about Jesus. Many times failed faith is faith in our own faith, '**if** only I believe strong enough'. Then the object of our faith does fail us, **if** my faith is in my faith, because it isn't all about us, it's all about Jesus and His good and gracious will for us.

You know simply thinking about this whole scene and sharing it with you is comforting and faith strengthening for me, the one who questions his own faith. Because what we are being shown through God's Word is that whatever the awful circumstances, whatever the desperate situation, whatever the frustration that we are haunted with, demonized with, whenever Jesus comes upon these circumstances and situations and frustrations, Jesus' Word takes command. And we're never out-a-reach of our Lord. We are never beyond His presence. Jesus is Immanuel = God with us through the command and the authority of His Word and Sacraments. And there is no '**if**' about these means of God's grace for us. They are objective reality in, with and under the water and Word of our Baptisms, in, with and under the bread and wine and Word of our Communion with Jesus. 'I believe, but help my unbelief' and Jesus answers that pray every time no **if's** about it.

III.

It's only Jesus who gets the job done, isn't it? And it's through the command and the authority of His Word which He has given for us, also. Here's the growing crowd gathering. Here's this sick boy. Here's this desperate Dad. Here's the argumentative scribes. Here's Jesus' failed disciples. Here is mounting, mounting faith weakening, faith failing circumstances. And Jesus, through His Word, takes command, '**You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again**'. The demon thrashes the boy violently, he's dead. Again Jesus through His Word, takes command and lifts the boy up. You can't help but see the Dad jumping forward reaching for his boy, carrying him home in his

arms with the biggest smile. The crowd breaks up. The scribes leave shaking their heads. Jesus enters the house and says to his failed disciples: **‘This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer’**. Here’s a Drs. diagnosis, here’s a financial problem, here’s a health condition, here’s a marriage and family dysfunction, here’s a death of a loved one. Here’s a mounting, mounting faith weakening, faith failing circumstances, whatever it is for you.

And Jesus, through His Word, takes command. No **if’s** about it. It isn’t **if** we believe hard enough, it isn’t **if** our self generated ‘faith’ is strong enough, it isn’t **if** by our self determination we pull through, it isn’t **if** by our valiant fight against disease and death we and our loved ones get better.. But, it’s by prayer, Jesus tells us. And prayer always has an object other than our selves. **1 John** says **‘This is our confidence in approaching God, when we ask anything according to His will He hears us’**. God’s will not our **if’s**. There is our object of our faith. Believing the will of God is always good and gracious no matter what the circumstances, all for Jesus’ sake who takes command by His Word.

Conclusion: All of us, anyone of us, can experience that crisis of faith. It is an awful thought to fear the loss of our faith. We go from moments of faith to moments of unbelief and skepticisms. Many times we can get caught in that miserable tension of faith and unbelief. Those doubts of **if, if, if**. But, help is always at hand, as Jesus is the One who takes command. Jesus is the One who lifts us up. Jesus is the One who is the object of our faith. Jesus is the One who is believable. Jesus is the One whose will is always to be merciful and gracious as we cry, as we pray ‘I believe! But, help my unbelief’. And Jesus always will, is our saving faith. Amen