

Sermon Title: *I do believe; help my unbelief*

Mark 9:14-29

When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. ¹⁶He asked them, ‘What are you arguing about with them?’ ¹⁷Someone from the crowd answered him, ‘Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; ¹⁸and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.’

¹⁹He answered them, ‘You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.’ ²⁰And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it threw the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. ²¹Jesus asked the father, ‘How long has this been happening to him?’ And he said, ‘From childhood.’ ²²It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.’ ²³Jesus said to him, ‘If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.’ ²⁴Immediately the father of the child cried out, ‘I do believe; help my unbelief!’ ²⁵When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, ‘You spirit that keep this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!’ ²⁶After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, ‘He is dead.’ ²⁷But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. ²⁸When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, ‘Why could we not cast it out?’ ²⁹He said to them, ‘This kind can come out only through prayer.’

Sometimes I wonder if the miracle stories of the Bible do more harm than good, especially these healing miracles. They cause us to say stupid and hurtful things to each other, like: IF you have enough faith; if you believe enough, you will be healed. Which really just works to add shame and guilt to sickness, grief and pain.¹ They are spectacular stories, most of them, and there can be comfort from watching Jesus calm a storm, heal the sick, and raise the dead. At least on one level, miracles remind us that the way things are is not the way they will always be, that they are not how God intends things to be – Jesus’ miracles remind us that the way that things are is *not* the will of God in many/most cases.

Jesus’ life and work show us that God’s will for us is not chaos, but wholeness. And, at least in some way, each miracle proclaims that truth. Every healing, every demon cast out, every laws of physics breaking act of the Gospels is like a hole poked through the fabric of time and space – the kingdom of God breaking through for a moment or two and we see a glimpse of how God longs for things to be here on earth (as it is in heaven). But then it is over.

I would venture to guess that almost all of us have experienced this a time or two like that in our lives – when, just for a moment, all felt at peace, all felt right with the world. And then, it was over. Our lives continued. It makes me think of that famous Christmas in 1914 during WWI when the British, Belgium, and French soldiers put down their rifles and came out of their trenches to sing carols, share chocolates and pictures of their families. A miraculous day of peace. And then the next day, they went back to killing each other. Life resumes. The formally

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor makes this point in her sermon, “The Problem with Miracles.”

blind person walks off to look for work, the disciples pick their oars back up and keep rowing after the sea is calm, the child gets up and asks for water – then, perhaps goes off to play.

Of all these healing stories, we wonder things like:

-how did Jesus decide who got a miracle? Did he?

-did Jesus ever try to perform miracles and they failed?

-was he making a point, or was the miracle the point?

-And of course, why do they seem so random? And where is my miracle?²

In her book, *Things I Wish Jesus had Said*, that some of us here read a few years ago, Rev. Barbara Nixon says, I wish Jesus had said, “Don’t expect a miracle.” While this might not make a very catchy bumper sticker, there are many times I too wish Jesus would have said this.

This healing story from Mark’s gospel for this morning, it is not one that I was very familiar with before now – one I was excited digging into when I chose it a few months ago, but was kicking myself about this week.

Jesus, Peter, James and John return from a few days on the mountain, where they find a crowd waiting for them – among the crowd are the nine other disciples and of course, ever-present, the critics of Jesus – the scribes. In Jesus’ absence they have apparently moved to arguing with the disciples instead.

² Also questions from “The Problem with Miracles” by Barbara Brown Taylor.

Jesus asks what they have been arguing about, and a man steps forth to answer, he describes a painful and difficult reality with his son – his son is periodically struck down with convulsions and paralysis. The father says it is a spirit in his son causing all of this – though, when we hear the father’s description through our 21st century lens, some of us might notice that this sounds quite similar to epilepsy.³ Though, it does not make it any less miraculous, whether Jesus heals this boy from an evil spirit or epilepsy.

We then learn what the all the arguing has been about, the disciples have tried unsuccessfully to heal the boy. It seems that this father has heard of Jesus’ power and has brought his son to see if he might be able to do something for him. In the absence of Jesus, he turns to his disciples. While they try, they are unable to heal him. They have been able to heal others in the past – earlier Jesus sent them out two by two, and they were able to do many miraculous works. But now – whether it is the pressure of the crowd, the hostility of the critics, or something else – they cannot help this father and son.

Upon hearing this story, Jesus responds with exasperation, with a sense of frustration. Though, scholars note, it is unclear whether Jesus is upset with the disciples, the crowd, or the scribes – perhaps all.

The story then turns to believing (as so many healing stories do). The son begins to have an attack, to convulse. The father says to Jesus, “*If* you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us!” Perhaps he was never quite sure if Jesus could help, or perhaps his confidence was shaken by the failure of the disciples. But this is the truth of what the father can say, of his belief.

³ Tim Geddert’s commentary on *Mark* from the Believers Church Commentary series is one of the many commentaries that points out this epilepsy possibility.

It reminds me of a prayer I kept repeating over and over again when I was in Colorado on a snowshoeing trip – it was getting dark and we were exhausted – unsure where our cabin was. I kept praying, “God, I don’t really think you work like this, but if you do – please, please help us find our cabin!”

The father continues, giving what might be the most honest and human confession in all of scripture, “I do believe, but help my unbelief!” I believe, or I want to believe – help me to believe – if you act, I will be able to believe. *Faith*, it has been said, *is measured in degrees of genuineness, not in degrees of certainty.*⁴

It is not a faith without doubt. But it is a genuine faith – full of question and uncertainty and honest doubt.

Jesus then gives a stern rebuke to the spirit, a violent reaction by the demon/unclean spirit, and it is gone. The whole ordeal has taken a toll on the child, he lays on the ground looking like a corpse. Some in the crowd think the boy is dead. But Jesus takes the boy by the hand and raises him up. He is healed.

And later that evening, the disciples finally get to be alone with Jesus, and it has apparently been eating at them all day that they could not do what Jesus did. And so finally, away from the crowds, they get the chance to ask him, “why could we not cast it out but you could?”

To which Jesus answers, “This kind can come out only through prayer.”

⁴ Also from Tim Geddert’s commentary on Mark.

Are you kidding me! This is all we get – this is the full answer, that it can only come out through prayer?! What does that even mean – how does that help us?!

If this is reflective of the actual dialogue that took place in that house, I don't know who to be more angry at, Jesus for his incomplete and cliché answer, or the disciples for their lack of follow-up questions. This answer makes me so frustrated. I want more. I want some clarity. I want a helpful answer. The story I can handle – it is a healing story like many others, that I can put into my filter and need for mystery. But then when you add this moment of seeking clarity from the disciples, a moment to peek behind the curtain, and this is all I get, “prayer.”

The answer leaves us wanting more. It leaves us to do the work of seeking understanding. It leaves us to keep searching and seeking.

My anger was diminished a bit in reading Ched Myers' commentary on the passage, helping me think about prayer in a slightly different way, he says:

To pray is to believe in a transformation of ourselves and the world.

Is not prayer the intensely personal struggle within each of us, and among us collectively, to resist despair and distraction? Is not prayer an act in which we articulate how we wish things might be: for healing, for love's embrace, for comfort, for another way to be found? Is prayer not the place where we seek to be formed in hope? Is prayer not the place where we seek imagination and a vision for how we might act as God's agents of healing and hope?⁵

To pray is to believe in a transformation of ourselves and the world.

⁵ Ched Myers, *Binding The Strong Man*.

To pray is to believe that transformation is possible.

Barbara Nixon notes that she often tells people in her congregation that, “The content of our prayer doesn’t really matter. We can be silent. Our prayers can be full of asking or of gratitude or complaints or laughter. They can be selfish or selfless, peace-seeking, or even vengeful.”⁶

It doesn’t matter.

It is the open heart, the honest and open heart that connects us to God – to the source of all love. It is the outpouring of the truth that opens us up, making space for God’s love to enter into and flow out of our lives.

Or, as Dominican Monk Herbert McCabe puts it, many of us waste our time praying for the wrong things – we waste time trying to pray like we think we should. “People always complain about following asleep during prayer” he says, “but this is usually a sign that we are praying for the wrong things. People on sinking ships have much to complain about, falling asleep while they are praying is not one of them.”⁷

⁶ From her book, *Things I Wish Jesus had Said*.

⁷ From his sermon on “Prayer” in his book, *God, Christ, and Us*.

And so in this story we do not get all my questions answered about miracles and encounters with the Divine, nor do I get a helpful word from Jesus that perhaps we shouldn't expect a miracle. What we do get is an example of genuine faith – we get a father who doesn't pretend to be doubtless or flawless – he is honest in his hope and honest in his doubt. “Faith,” he reminds us, “is measured in degrees of genuineness, not in degrees of certainty.” And perhaps Jesus' answer to the disciples is a little more helpful than I thought at first, that any miracle begins in prayer:

- to speak that which we genuinely long for
- to seek hope in the midst of despair
- to be angry at the way things are
- to sit silently, unable to utter one single word or thought
- to seek transformation

Barbara Nixon talks about her honest prayers during the final days of her father's life, “I was praying that I would have *more precious time* with my father. I am sure that he was praying that his life end quickly, sweetly, without too much pain, and coherently. The content of neither prayer mattered, nor changed the course of his illness. We were being totally honest about our longings and open with God. And in that honesty, love guided our times together and we both felt a deep peace.”⁸

⁸ Also from her book, *Things I Wish Jesus Had Said*.

It helps me remember that Jesus prayed for a miracle the night before he was killed. He prayed to his *Abba* that this cup be removed from him – that this burden be lifted – for God to intervene and let him live a long life. But when he opened his eyes, the cup was still there. No miracle. No deliverance for Jesus. Was it because he lacked faith?

Perhaps the miracle is that he kept going – or perhaps the miracle was the strength given to him in that moment to not give into despair, to not give into fear, but to continue to walk the path to which God had called him. Perhaps the miracle of what he did on the cross began (or was sustained by) with that prayer in the garden. Honest prayer. Genuine faith.

May we pray as best we can – honestly, with genuine faith and genuine doubt. May we a people who seek hope and transformation, which begins in prayer – which begins in approaching the mystery of God.

May we be a people of genuine faith.

May we be a miraculous people. Amen.