

“Help My Unbelief”

Mark 9:14-29

January 14, 2007

We begin this morning by noting that tomorrow is a holiday in celebration of the life and work of Martin Luther King, Jr. His efforts to bring about civil rights and humane treatment under the law for African-Americans, as well as all persons, have been recognized in retrospect – even if they were controversial and disputed during his lifetime. The song we sang at the beginning of the service, “Lift Every Voice and Sing” is from that time and is a way we remember.

The song we just sang, “Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore” recognized and celebrates the beginning of the Spanish-language service later this afternoon. What a marvelous thing it is to see God’s hand at work bringing people from every nation and tribe together to praise His name! It is kind of like a mountaintop experience.

Following the majesty of the mountaintop, Jesus and the three disciples come down and find themselves in the midst of a mess.

Isn’t that just the way it happens?

At first glance our Scripture text this morning seems like it belongs earlier in the book where Mark is illustrating the power of Jesus over nature, over evil, over everything. Because he includes it here, however, we have to take a look at what he is trying to tell his readers about Jesus and his mission. At this point in the gospel, Jesus has turned his attention towards Jerusalem and the work he has to do as the “Son of God.”

Mark 9: 14-29

This story is so rich with meaning that I would like to take a few moments to go through it a little more slowly and point out some things that might be missed if we rush to how this applies to us.

Verse 14 sets the scene. Jesus, Peter, James, and John come back down from the mountaintop where Jesus has been transfigured before them. Remember that the description was that Jesus’ garment became “dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.” As they are returning, the four of them see a crowd gathered around the remaining disciples and there is an argument. Mark identifies the scribes as the ones who are disputing with the disciples.

Verse 15 begins the action. The crowd sees Jesus and they were immediately overcome with awe. Why? Although we cannot say for certain, the impression Mark gives here is that Jesus’ brilliantly white garment has not faded and that transfiguration -- the one that gave rise to the awe and fear that Peter, James, and John experienced on the mountaintop – that transfiguration has also impacted the crowd. They run toward Jesus.

Verse 16 and 18 frame the issue. Jesus asks why the scribes are arguing with the disciples and “someone from the crowd” answered him. Mark is indicating that the man later identified as the boy’s father was part of the crowd and speaks for them. He says that the disciples were unable to cast out the spirit that makes his boy mute and causes him seizures. He describes what the

seizures look like, “dashes him down, he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid.” The subtext of this response is, “They were not powerful enough; are you?”

Verse 19 is important because it shows the suffering that the human Jesus experiences in his work as the Son of God. He is anguished by the faith-less-ness of this generation; how they are blind to who he is. Mark may be cautioning his readers – believers in Rome who were wondering if faith in Jesus Christ was worth the cost – that they need hold fast to their faith. Even in the midst of the faithless crowd and the accusing scribes, he orders that the boy be brought to him.

The battle begins in verse 20. The spirit sees Jesus and immediately begins doing exactly what the boy’s father described. “He convulsed the boy, he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth.” Whether trying to intimidate Jesus or to take one last shot at the boy, the spirit manifests its power, revealing how strong must be the one to cast it out.

Jesus does not immediately cast out the spirit; instead, in verse 21, he continues to engage with the Father. “How long has he been like this?” The father’s answer, “since childhood,” raises the stakes by again indicating the depth of control the spirit has. Underneath the father’s comment is the implicit understanding that the father has tried everything in his power to seek out help. The spirit has tried to destroy his boy by throwing him into fires and water.

The father’s frustration at the inability to find a cure for his boy shows in his next comment. “If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.” The father is basically asking, “Do you have the power to do this?”

Jesus rebukes the man, a second time, for his unbelief. “If you can?” The man receives this rebuke and utters the plea from the depths of his soul: “I believe, help my unbelief!” We will come back to this later.

In verse 25, Jesus takes action. He commands out the spirit. Note that he names the spirit “deaf and mute” – there has been no previous indication that the boy was deaf during the course of the seizures – but then, this deaf spirit hears and this mute spirit cries out. It convulses the boy, but it comes out.

And what follows is why this text comes after Peter’s confession, “the boy was like a corpse.” It looked as if he was dead. People in the crowd were saying to each other, “He is dead.” The boy’s death would have been a victory for the spirit over Jesus. It would have been the destruction of the boy, which was the goal of the spirit anyway.

But the spirit did not have the last word. Jesus took the boy by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. Jesus had the power to raise him to life and was victorious over the unclean spirit and death. Jesus just gave a preview of his own resurrection. It was a demonstration of the work of the Son of God.

In the next text, Jesus will describe exactly how his own death and resurrection will take place. It was such a revolutionary thought; that the one this powerful and with this much authority would willingly be subject to destruction by earthly government. He keeps on having to repeat himself because they cannot grasp the idea that God’s ultimate power would be expressed in human powerlessness.

So, how does this encounter apply today? Two specific things I want to mention here: first, that there can be spiritual sources to physical problems; and, second, that belief in Jesus needs to come first and not last.

1. There can be spiritual sources to physical problems.

Perhaps many of you are like me and read this text this morning and thought, “Oh, the boy has epilepsy.”

It is as if being able to name a complex of symptoms gives us power over it.

If a boy had these symptoms today, we would probably not think twice about taking him to a doctor to diagnose the problem. “Epilepsy,” the doctor would say, and then prescribe a series of medications to be taken to combat and control the seizures. If the doctor insisted on running a series of tests before confirming the initial diagnosis, we might engage in a little bit of prayer, “Please God make it something else. Don’t let it be a tumor or epilepsy, make it something that we can handle.”

To suggest that the problem may have its source in an unclean spirit makes all of us uneasy. In our culture it raises the specter that we are going to be like those people who do things like refuse medical treatment and rely only on the strength of our own faith and prayers. The problem with our culture’s approach is that we have so completely swung the pendulum away from attributing *everything* to spiritual causes is that we no longer allow that *anything* can have a spiritual root cause. I am not pointing fingers because I do this, too.

Let me illustrate it this way. On Friday, when the Assistant Principal of Eastlake High School was brutally murdered, and her family made a plea for her son to turn himself in, they said that he was a paranoid schizophrenic. The thought crossed my mind, “if he has a psychological, psychiatric, or chemical problem, why wasn’t he in treatment?” (As it turns out, he had been released from treatment and that was one of the family’s complaints.) But my point here is this: It was not until way down the line – specifically, as I returned my thoughts to this sermon – that I began to wonder if there is a spiritual dimension to the situation.

Yes, there are those who have psychiatric chemical imbalance issues who are helped dramatically by medications that have been developed. Yes, there are alcoholics who simply suffer for lack of treatment. Yes, there are those who have addictions to drugs or other things. Yet there are also those who have been possessed by the demonic which seeks to destroy them.

And it is not just individuals. When we look over the course of the last century and see the repeated episodes of genocide, there is more than a simple, scientific answer for the question, “Why?” The holocaust, the millions lost under Stalin, Rwanda, Sudan, ethnic wars throughout the Middle East, how long a list do we need to make in order to understand that there is a spiritual war taking place all around us? On this Martin Luther King, Jr, weekend, we remember the institutional evil that drove Christian brothers and sisters to violence against each other and the struggle to bring about reconciliation among believers. Evil is real, evil seeks to destroy us on a large and a personal scale, and evil seeks to drive us to death. In Ephesians, Paul tells believers,

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.” (Ephesians 6:10-13 NIV)

There are spiritual sources to physical problems. Paul exhorts us to put on the full armor of God to stand against those schemes. Jesus affirms the diagnosis that the boy is troubled by a spirit – a powerful spirit.

But here is the good news and the point of the story: Jesus is able to defeat evil and death and restore the boy to health.

In our world and in our work as disciples of Jesus Christ, we need to be attuned and aware of the spiritual warfare that is taking place around us. We need to have our eyes open to see those who are being oppressed, attacked and tormented by evil. These are not things that can be cast out by science or by our own authority. We need to hear Jesus’ instruction, “This kind can come out only by prayer.”

As an aside, please do not hear me to be making an assault on science. Science *as ultimate truth* is an idol and a problem; science *as a revelation of the majesty and mystery of God* is completely consistent with God’s will. In fact it is not always the mindset of the scientist that is controlling; the marvelous thing is that God often uses non-believers to achieve ends that are a blessing to believers.

2. Belief in Jesus needs to come first and not last.

You can almost hear the father’s exhaustion as he expresses to Jesus the thoughts of the crowd, “If you can do anything, have pity on us.” This is a man who has been defeated.

Jesus rebukes him – and the crowd – for their unbelief; that simply because the disciples were unable to remove the unclean spirit does not mean that he would not be able.

Yet, I do not know about you, but I can completely understand the position of the father in this story. Many people have a utilitarian kind of faith: if it works and achieves what I want, then it must be good. If it does not work, then I will move onto the next thing that might be able to do what I want.

The problem is: that is not really faith.

Faith is believing in the one whom you cannot control. Faith is believing that the one who might say, “no,” is still good, despite not doing what I want.

Faith, friends, is believing that the one who has power over death, who has victory over death, who has given himself unto death for the sake of our sins; that same one has invited us to join him in everlasting life. The preview of the resurrection in the healing of this boy, the preview of

the resurrection in Jesus' victory over the destructive goal of the unclean spirit, the preview of the resurrection in the presence and witness of the crowd who did not believe – all these things go to show the love of God for us.

The father's receipt of Jesus' rebuke, "I believe, help my unbelief," is a great cry for each one of us. It reminds us that we need to put our trust first in Jesus. It means going first to Jesus in prayer: praising God for the blessings we have in our adoption as children of God, and pleading on behalf of the needs we are able to identify.

We need to go to prayer first. Jesus did not need to pray. He had the authority in himself. We, on the other hand, need to pray.

- My call as pastor here came as a result of prayers offered long before I was even aware of this congregation's existence.
- The new Spanish-speaking service starting today came as a result of prayers offered long before the Bible study even began.
- The existence of the buildings on this campus came after many, many prayers for a congregation to be planted here in Chula Vista.

The power of God manifest in response to the prayers of his people is a glorious thing to behold. We pray with the expectation that God is going to bless those prayers. What is it we want to happen?

- More people? We need to pray.
- More resources? We need to pray.
- More opportunities to reach out? We need to pray.
- More awareness of those in our congregation in need? We need to pray.
- The glory of God to be revealed in our midst? We need to pray.

There is no power on heaven and earth greater than God. There is no one able to provide what we need better than God. Why do we trust anyone or anything else? Let us step out in faith, boldly asking God to do the things he has promised to do.

"Most of them said, 'He is dead.'" Ah, yes, we thought he was dead. However, death does not have the last word. "But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand."

"Lord, we believe; help our unbelief."

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

8:15 offering; 10:00 liturgist invitation to offering