

Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost, September 16, 2018, Liturgical Year "B"

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Mark 9:14-29

"Help Me in My Unbelief"

You might be wondering about the words in today's Holy Gospel – "*they were coming toward the other apostles*" – well, who were they? Jesus, with Peter, James and John, was coming back to join the other Apostles after the transfiguration, in the northern part of Israel. At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus had told His disciples that it was time to take up the cross. His calling, and the three Apostles' awareness of it, had been confirmed by the heavenly voice that said, "*this is my beloved Son, listen to Him.*" (Mark 9:7) Now, the road leads to Jerusalem.

Up until now, for the disciples and Apostles, it has been fairly easy to follow Jesus; but from here on - it's going to be harder and harder. It begins with a problem for the disciples. They had been able to cast out demons in Jesus' name, but they encountered a case that had them beaten. They were puzzled, not realizing that there were, different degrees of demons, some being harder to deal with than others. All Jesus will say, as an explanation, is that this kind takes prayer, special prayer, a particularly focused spiritual effort. We get the sense of the disciples' inability to deal with the problem, and the crowd's subsequent impatience with them. These followers of Jesus have turned a corner in their walk with Him; but now it's going to get even harder – on their trek to Jerusalem.

Today, a lot of people think that the early part of a person's Christian walk with Jesus Christ are the difficult ones, and that as you go on in the Christian life it gets more clear. I want to suggest to you that it can be the exact opposite. You see, when you learn to walk beside Jesus, you are given harder tasks, which will demand more courage, and more spiritual energy. Following Jesus is not like a summer vacation. Jesus' response to the problem is to comment sorrowfully - '*O unbelieving generation*', and to ask them how much longer He will be with them. Something about the father's plea, and the crowd's faithless interest, and in the disciples' inability to deal with it all, says to Jesus that whatever is going on it isn't faith.

Here is a parent who is desperate with anxiety over his child. The mood is very tense; (this is exactly what Jesus and His apostles walked in on) things have changed, and everything seems more demanding. Earlier in the Gospel, many people come to Jesus with what appears to be comparatively strong faith. They touch him and are healed; it seems as simple as that. But for this man, in this situation, faith is very hard. This father seems to be caught in the middle between faith and doubt, living in a world of half-belief - where he is never sure. After the disciples' failure to heal his son, the man isn't sure whether Jesus Himself will be able to do it. His request is made with what I perceive as with a kind of shrug of uncertainty. He says to Jesus, "*Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.*" (Mark 9:17-19) "*O unbelieving generation,*" Jesus replied, "*how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.*" This father's response to Jesus' question about how long this boy has been like suffering with this is filled with doubt: "*From*

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childhood," he answered. "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." (Mark 9:21-22) Jesus responds to the man's doubtful question and plea by saying, "**If you can?**" *"Everything is possible for him who believes."* (Mark 9:23) In essence, Jesus is telling them man to open his eyes, his heart and his mind to whom is right in front of him. Get with the program!

How many time do we qualify our belief?

There is one word that tells it all – and if this word is put at the beginning of a statement or plea for help – it is conditional.

- **If** this happens, **then I** will believe. How many times do you hear this – “O God, if you will just heal me – then I will read the Bible every day.”
- Lord, **if** you do this – **then I** will do that.

We should not be asking God to make a deal with us –God is not Monty Hall, do you remember “Let’s Make a Deal” – with door number one, door number two and door number three. There are no doors! It is either YES or NO. We should not be trying to make a deal -three of the Gospels – Mark, Matthew and Luke - tell of the instance with the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years. There was no condition that she put upon God – she put the condition upon herself. She was broke, having spent her money for doctors and desperate. According to Jewish Law – she was declared as unclean for twelve years! This meant she had to live outside the city - away from other people. She knew, being shunned - that **if** she just touched Jesus’ cloak that she would be healed. She didn’t say ‘Jesus -if you will heal me then I will touch your cloak. She didn’t have to say a word. Her life would be restored to her. The IF is on her part – if she can touch His clothing – she would be healed. She asked for nothing – her faith was so strong that she believed IF she just touched His cloak her healing would be real. God does not want you to make conditions for Him. He makes conditions for us – read the Law of Moses: “if you do this – then this will happen. The curses and the Law – the if’s are on us. She asked for nothing – her faith was so strong that she believed IF she just touched His cloak her healing would be real, and it would be immediate. The condition was on her faith and her crawling to see her Savior. There is a great difference between her faith and the “if you can” of the boy’s father.

Jesus put the man on the spot, saying, *"Everything is possible for him who believes."* *Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"* When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. *"You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again."* (Mark 9:23-25) Jesus told this man – have faith, if you can. Just believe and it will happen! The man’s response was shouted out to Jesus saying that he does believe – but he asks the Lord to help him to get rid of any doubt in his spirit. As the Gospel says, Jesus addressed the demon and told it to never return to the boy – with authority that comes from God Himself, freeing him from this “hell on earth.” Mark tells us, which is really from the eyewitness viewpoint of the Apostle Peter: *"The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead."* (Mark 9:26) What happens next is very, very,

Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost, September 16, 2018, Liturgical Year “B”

very significant. Hear what Mark writes: “*But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.*” That doesn’t sound all that significant – does it? But, trust me it is. I went to the original Greek to see what Mark wrote and when we see “lifted” – Mark actually used this Greek word - ἤγειρεν *hegeiron* – which actually means ‘raises him up’ and then ἀνέστη *anestay* – he arose. These were resurrection words to the New Testament world. Jesus had taken this young man who was steeped in darkness – drove the darkness out of him and lifted him to new life – a life in the light of Christ.

Remember, that after this, they were headed toward Jerusalem. Here is Jesus, God’s beloved son, on His way to His own death and resurrection, rebuking the spirit; it leaves the boy apparently dead, but Jesus ‘raises him up, and he arises.’

The Gospel then tell us that the Apostles needed to get Jesus alone to find out more. And so, like with the parable of the sower of the seed, they got Jesus aside and He explained it to them. “*After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer. "* (Mark 9:28-29) There is something interesting there – “*this kind*” – you mean there is more than one kind? You mean there is more than one kind of evil spirit? There is more than one kind of demon? Didn’t Jesus say, “*You deaf and mute spirit,*” He spoke to a deaf and mute spirit that was inside the boy and causing him this great, great pain. More faith and more power was what the apostles needed from God Himself – through prayer.

When we are faced with a crisis, do we try to fix it under our own power (as we usually do) or do we know how to pray with whatever faith we may have? Seeking God and saying, ‘*I believe; help me in my unbelief!*’

Let me close with these words from the Apostle Peter, himself, that I believe puts this all into perspective: “*And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.*” (1 Peter 5:10-11)