

THE DOUBTFUL BELIEVER
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church
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Mark 9:14-29¹

Several times during his ministry, Jesus would go off with a core group of his disciples—Peter, James, and John. I guess you could say those three were a sort of executive committee of the disciples.

On one such occasion, Jesus and these three were returning from a time away, and discovered that a large crowd had gathered around the nine remaining disciples. What's going on? As Jesus approached, he could hear voices raised in anger, and, we can imagine, he could see the flustered faces of these disciples. They were clearly under some pressure from the crowd. What on earth . . . ?

When the crowd spotted Jesus, they ran to him. Jesus asks: "What were you arguing about?" A man steps forward and explains that he had come to the disciples, asking that they heal his son. The son, it turns out, suffered from some sort of seizures that today we might consider a form of epilepsy. "I brought him to your disciples," explained the father, "but they couldn't do anything."

Jesus sounds a little exasperated at the disciples' inability to heal the boy: "You faithless generation. How much longer must I be among you." Then he turns to the father: "How long has he been like this?" The father describes the symptoms, and concludes: "If you are able to do anything, have mercy on us and help us." Jesus replies: "If you are able—all things are possible for the one who believes." It is then that the father makes the reply that rings down through the ages: "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" Jesus calls out the demon that has afflicted the boy. He lifts him by the hand, and he is well.

¹ During the summer of 2006, the sermons are based on texts which do not appear in the Revised Common Lectionary.

Later, Jesus speaks with the disciples. “Why could we not cast that demon out?” Jesus’ reply is enigmatic: “This kind cannot be driven out by anything except prayer.”

It is a wondrous and strange story. At first glance we may think that the message of this story is: Try harder. All things are possible for those who pray harder, for those who believe harder, who squinch their eyes and their fists and really work at this faith business. All things are possible for those who try like that. Or so it seems.

But in fact the word of this little story is just the opposite. It’s not about my effort or my energy—it is about Jesus. The centerpiece is the plaintive cry of the father: “Lord I believe; help my unbelief.” Here’s a man who admits that his faith is not all it should be. He is no spiritual giant, no member of the saintly hall of fame. He is just an ordinary person, finding himself somewhere between perfect faith and no faith. And yet his son is healed, puny faith and all.

There is something attractive about this man, honestly admitting as he does his mixture of faith and doubt. He is attractive because he is like, well, us. We know we’re supposed to have faith, to believe totally in Jesus. But on too many days in too many ways we find ourselves somewhere in the middle between faith and unbelief. We want to believe, we really do. But we’ve got these doubts and weaknesses and questions. Lord, we believe; help our unbelief.

If we were to diagram the expected path of faith for a typical church member, it would be something like this: As a child, we believe with a naïve faith, expecting God to answer our prayers. Someone recalled for me a time when, as a child, he had prayed for a sack of marbles, and then held out his hands expecting the bounty of marbles to cascade from heaven.

During our teen years that simple faith begins to be called into question, and it culminates during young adult years, perhaps in college, when you sleep in on Sunday and don’t much practice faith at all. Then you get married and decide your children need church, so that brings you back and you recommit yourself and are active and strong in your faith from that time forward.

We adults know it isn’t so. Our adult faith is a series of ups and downs. It’s like the dimmer switch on the lights in your dining room. You have times when the lights are on full bright and faith is strong and sure. And other times when the light is dim and the

shadows are strong and you've got more questions than answers. Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.

We have not arrived in our faith. We are works in progress, with faith and doubt all mixed up together. We are always starting over, from sin to salvation, from unbelief to faith. Martin Luther put it well: "Our being is in becoming."²

And yet there is also faith. Maybe a lot, maybe sometimes just a little. But it is there. The sure confidence that Jesus is for us, regardless of our faith. The German theologian Jurgen Moltmann puts it this way:

To put it simply: God is for me; I am his child. Christ is beside me; I am his brother or sister. Whether I believe more strongly or whether I doubt all the more, whether I am swallowed up in the darkness of night or find myself at the dawn of a new day—this I know: there is someone waiting for me, who will not give me up, who goes ahead of me, who lifts me up, someone to whom I am important.³

Sometimes we have the idea that if doubt intrudes, or if our faith is weak, then we've got to give up the whole project, like swimming away from a capsized boat. This man who encounters Jesus reminds us otherwise. We are a mixture of faith and unfaith, and that's OK. Our trust is not in ourselves, but in Jesus.

After all, Jesus' words tell us who to trust. "All things are possible for the one who believes." And who is that one who believes? There is only one, and that is Jesus. If I've got to rely on my own grand faith, or you depend on your marvelous ability to believe, then we're all in trouble. Instead, we hitch our wagon to Jesus, and trust his ability to believe for us.

Ernest Campbell, the former pastor of the Riverside church in New York, tells the time when his wife died. The board of the church gave him a time away from his church responsibilities, yet he said that during that time he kept coming to church each Sunday, sitting with others in the congregation. "After my wife's death," he said, "I didn't even know whether I believed or what I believed. I let others do the believing for me, until faith would return."⁴

² Quoted in Jurgen Moltmann, *Experiences of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), p. 4.

³ Moltmann, p. 5

⁴ I have been unable to find the source of this account.

Do you have those times when your faith has dried up? Live as if your faith were still strong. Do you doubt the power of prayer? Pray anyway. Do you feel that God has abandoned you? Trust all the same.

“This kind can only be cast out by prayer,” says Jesus. It is not our doing. It is rather in casting ourselves on the mercy of Jesus, praying “in Jesus’ name,” that we find our life, whether in faith or unfaith.

The old 16th century Westminster Confession says it in words that are surprisingly up-to-date:

[Our] faith is different by degrees. [It is] weak or strong. [It] may be often and in many ways assailed and weakened, but [it] gets the victory, growing up in . . . a full assurance through Christ, who is both the author and finisher of our faith.⁵

Our Tuesday morning men’s Bible study has been looking at the writing of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who lived and died in Germany during the rise of Adolph Hitler and the Second World War. Because of Bonhoeffer’s open opposition to Hitler, he was arrested and spent two years in prison. Just days before the end of the war, Bonhoeffer was hanged by the Nazis.

In the days of his imprisonment he was a true witness to faith. Other prisoners remarked at his courage, his joy, his strong faith even in the midst of this adversity. But Bonhoeffer wrote a poem which has been preserved for us that gives us into a window on the soul of this courageous martyr:

Who am I? They often tell me
I stepped from my cell’s confinement
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
like a Squire from his country house.

Who am I? They often tell me
I used to speak to my warders
freely and friendly and clearly,
as though it were mine to command.

Who am I? they also tell me I bore the days of misfortune

⁵ *The Book of Confessions* (Presbyterian Church U.S.A.), 6.080.

equably, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I myself know of myself?
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat,
yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,
tossing in expectation of great events,
powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
weary and empty at pray, at thinking, at making,
faint, and ready to say farewell to it all.

Who am I? This or the Other?
Am I one person today and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
and before myself a contemptible woebegone weakling?
Or is something within me still like a beaten army
fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!⁶

In belief and unbelief, friends, cling to Jesus. †

⁶ Reprinted in *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone 1995), p. 19-20.