

May 6 – If You Are Able?

Mark 9:14-29

Can you remember a time where you were so worried about a person or an event that it filled all your thoughts? At times like these you are not at your best. You say things you don't mean, lash out at people for no reason and life feels like it is going to overwhelm you. This was the emotional state of the father when he brings his son to Jesus for healing. The son is seriously ill with uncontrollable seizures. It doesn't help the father's emotional state to find out that Jesus, with Peter, James and John, has gone to the top of the mountain to pray. There Jesus will be transfigured. The disciples tried to help the son but with no success. When Jesus and the three return, they find everything in an uproar. He learns of the boy's condition and the failure of the disciples to help him. He scolds them all for being faithless and then asks that the boy be brought to him. In desperation the father says, "If you are able to do anything show us compassion and help us."

The father is so distraught that now he doubts whether or not Jesus can do anything! He has been let down so many times he wonders if Jesus will let him down too. Jesus gets angry at the suggestion he cannot heal. Jesus said, "If you are able? All things can be done for the one who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out "I believe, help my unbelief." The father admits that he is part of those who doubt and asks for healing of his doubts, realizing that this must come before the healing of his son.

We resonate with the father in this healing story. His words are sometimes our words. We might not actually express our doubting that Jesus can help us in this particular situation but there are times when our doubts and fears are as strong or stronger than our faith. We believe but we are filled with unbelief.

Where do you doubt Jesus can really help you? There are many times doubt is present in the midst of our statements of belief. We often pray for specific help from God. We believe God can and could help us but our prayers are without expectation that anything will really change. I recall a story about a community in Kansas that was

going through a prolonged drought. The ministers of the town decided to hold a prayer service at the fairgrounds. The entire community was asked to gather and pray that God would send rain. Hundreds showed up to pray but only one little girl brought an umbrella. They came praying for rain but no one expected God to answer their prayers, at least at that moment.

Now just because we pray and believe fervently in God's ability to answer our prayers doesn't mean your prayers will be answered, at least in the specific way you expect. God is not some kind of great vending machine in the sky where, if you put enough conviction into the prayer, out pops the desired response. We need to pray with trust and with expectation.

The father in the story makes me ask where I pray without expectation. I think about how many times I have prayed with no real anticipation that anything will change. My rational brain gets in the way of trusting in God. Now, when I find myself doubting God I admit to it and ask God to heal my unbelief. I come trusting that God will be at work in whatever situation I lift up to God. I don't assume the answer to my prayer will be in the form I necessarily want. I always strive to end a petition with, "I know you are at work in this situation. Let me glorify what you are doing." We believe, help our unbelief.

Another way we need to be healed from our unbelief is when we doubt God really cares about us or loves us. When I preach about the unconditional love of God, I almost always have someone come up to me who wants to argue that God cannot possibly love everyone unconditionally. For them some people, by their actions, have set themselves outside the love of God. They feel that the love of God, if too freely given to others, takes something away from their faith. They want to feel special. This causes people of faith, at times, to begin to put people into categories. We label those like us and who believe as we do as beloved and worthy of God's love. Those we label as "them" we place outside of God's grace proclaiming the need for standards. The problem is that if we doubt God could love one such as them we are also afraid God might not always love us. Jesus' message and our faith is based upon the idea that God is a God of love. It is centered in the idea that all are beloved children of God. Yet we

sometimes doubt that love for others. Even more, we sometimes doubt God could really love us just the way we are. We are feeling wretched because of something we have said or done. We feel unloved so how could God love us. We need to be healed from our unbelief. We need to believe God loves all unconditionally so we can fully feel love and its healing power in our lives. I believe in the God of Love, God help my unbelief.

We also say we believe that God forgives and wipes the slate of our lives clean and yet we doubt. As a pastor I have heard, "I know you say God forgives us but..." and then they say they have done something in their past for which they are sure there is no forgiveness. Or they come to me saying that they are still feeling remorse over something they have done. They have asked for forgiveness but can't believe God would really forgive them. They can't release it and move on. We need to be free from this doubt and fully accept God's forgiveness.

I think of a man who came to talk to me after I preached a sermon about how God forgives and forgets. I said that if we bring it up to God again we have to remind God of what we did because God's forgiveness means it is no longer a part of our story. Yes, those past deeds might have a great impact on today but the deed, when we seek forgiveness and have made restitution for damage done, is forgiven and forgotten by God. This man struggled mightily with this idea. He had walked away from a wife and son many years ago. His wife had move on and remarried. His son, though they were not close, held no ill will towards him. When he asked me why it was so hard to believe he was forgiven and to move on I said, "To do so, you have to love all the parts of your life as much as God loves you." He cried and then said, "That is the key. I don't love that time in my life or my actions." He was coming to terms with his life when he learned a few months later he had terminal cancer. He died at peace.

The last one I want to lift up today where we live in doubt comes in the message of eternal life offered to us. President Jimmy Carter has been teaching an Adult Sunday School class most of his life. Many of his devotions for that class were put together in a book. Here is what he says about this: "We say we believe in the resurrection but we often live as though we don't. We say we have faith that through Christ we will live after death, yet our doubts persist."

Doubt about life after death can cause us to make certain health care choices and can rob us of the joy in life. I see people hearing diagnosis of terminal illness who are angry at God, at life and filled with fear. Others, though possibly fearing the dying process, are determined to wring every last minute of joy possible out of their remaining days. Some face death with expectation and others with timidity, and these are all responses of people who are faithful in church. We need to be healed of our doubt and live with assurance.

I understand the frustration and desperation of the father. He loved his son dearly. He wanted him healed. He had been offered promises that ended up being broken. Jesus, at that moment, seemed to be one more empty hope. We have all been there and need to hear Jesus' stinging reply that God is able to do something for us.

In most of the healing stories of Jesus we have the absolute faith of the person in Jesus ability to heal. This is a story about the Spirit strengthening us in our times of questions and doubts to make us stronger. It is okay to doubt. We should express them. Then we can work on them and, through that work, find healing and reassurance.