



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

September 30, 2018

"Help my Unbelief" - Hope Restored Sermon Series

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Mark 9:14-29:

¹⁴ When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵ When the whole crowd saw Him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet Him. ¹⁶ He asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?"

¹⁷ Someone from the crowd answered Him, "Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; ¹⁸ and 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."

¹⁹ He 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." ²⁰ And they brought the boy to Him. When the spirit saw Him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth.

²¹ Jesus asked the father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. ²² It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if You are able to do anything, have compassion on us and help us." ²³ Jesus said to him, "If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes."

²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" ²⁵ When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!"

²⁶ After 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." ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand.

²⁸ When He had entered the house, His disciples asked Him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" ²⁹ He said to them, "This kind can come out only through prayer."

We continue today in our Hope Restored series as we wind our way through the Gospel of Mark.

Last week we read of a mind-blowing incident where Jesus is transfigured on a mountain as He is accompanied by three of His disciples. Moses showed up. Elijah showed up.

In that scenario Jesus physically radiated a shining glory so great that Mark tries hard to put to words that describe the dazzling splendor which took place on that mountain (9.3).

Even God the Father spoke from Heaven (a rare occurrence in the New Testament). It all must have been quite breath taking.

However, as sublime, dramatic and spectacular as all that was we see in our story today, and this is really important for us to get, that this extraordinary and seemingly otherworldly power doesn't just stay up in mountain top experiences, but is brought to bear on the nitty gritty of everyday life, of people's pain and despair.

Brought to bear on people and places where life isn't always dazzling, but where life can often be confusing, and often shake our faith and often drain our souls. Because down from that mountain is the place where many who follow God live in what I call that "Space between;" that space between hope and disappointment, faith and doubt, that space between belief and unbelief.

Do any of *you* know that place I'm talking about today? Maybe this is why this story of this father and his son has meant so much to so many over the centuries, because *our* journeys with God - If we are really honest - are so often like theirs. A journey between God's promises and our pain.

As verse 14 points out, Jesus and the three disciples came down from that mountain and into a gathering of a "great crowd." And in the middle of that crowd there is a heated dispute between the nine other apostles and some

Jewish scribes. The word "argue" in verses 14 & 16 means to have a very forceful disagreement. In other words there is some major heat going on here.

The Scribes were Jewish teachers of the Hebrew Scriptures, but in the gospels they are often portrayed as being opposed to Jesus and His ministry.

So what all that means here in this scenario is this: The disciple's failure to cast out a demon from a boy gives the scribes further ammunition to undermine the teachings and work of Jesus.

Now to be fair we saw in Mark 6:12-13 how the disciples *did in fact* cast out demons. As you see here it says, "*The disciples went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons...*"

Have you ever had that happen where you did something that God seemed to bless so abundantly and then another time you try it again, the very same thing, and it's a total bomb? I've done that with sermons I've preached or classes I have taught. Great in one place or to one age group, and then in another place with another age group - a complete bomb! It can be really discouraging. It can leave you

feeling, "am I really cut out for this?" I wonder if the disciples ever felt like that?

So as Jesus is asking what in the world is everyone arguing about? Verses 17-18 tells us that a father stepped forward and said: "*Teacher, I brought you my son;*

He has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; ¹⁸ and 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."

The phrase "they could not do so" at that end of verse 18 is actually a bit more stinging in the original language of the New Testament. In the Greek, the words convey more accurately that the disciples proved too weak to handle things.

Imagine someone saying that *about you* in front of your boss. "Well Jesus, I came here to do business with you, but your managers just didn't have what it took, they were too weak to handle it."

That's going to leave a sting. Then to add salt to the wound Jesus responds with a sense of deep exasperation when He heard all this.

In Verse 19 *"He answered them, 'You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him (the boy) to me."*

What is hard to know for certain here is who is the "them" mentioned? Is it just the disciples? Would Jesus use the word "generation" to speak of just nine guys? Was it the scribes? Was it the crowd? Was it the scribes and the crowd and the disciples? Or was this simply a more general expression of exasperation about the whole human environment? It's hard to tell.

All we do know for sure is He sounds really exasperated. As an aside, I can't help but wonder if Jesus is thinking something like, "A half hour ago I was with Elijah and Moses and now I'm stuck with you guys! My aching back!"

Kidding aside, and being fair to Jesus, the disciples have already displayed sporadic incompetence and incomprehension through-out His ministry.

Remember their fear during a storm on the sea of Galilee? Remember their skepticism to feed 5,000 and then later on 4,000 people? Remember Jesus having to strongly rebuked Peter in Chapter 8 - *"Get behind me, Satan!"*

The list of their faux pas is long and their obtuseness will get even worse before this Gospel finishes! Yet, and this is a big yet, Jesus sticks with them. We see this at the end where Jesus is speaking to the disciples privately in a house and explains why this kind of demon was difficult to cast out (verse. 28-29). My point is, as exasperated as Jesus is, He continues to disciple these guys who found it *often* difficult to get it right.

I find this incredibly encouraging because it says to me despite my wobbly spirituality Jesus *doesn't* dismiss us as others might - like our teachers might, or our bosses might, or even as our parents might. But just as any good and healthy parent does who has to deal with his or her own naïve or bungling child, Jesus speaks the truth *and* then helps to instruct them in love to get to a better place.

He never gives up on them and He never gives up on you and this leads us to one of my favorite dialogues I think in all the gospels.

In verses 21-22 we see this: *"²¹ Jesus asked the father, 'How long has this been happening to him?' And he said, 'From childhood. ²² It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if You are able to do anything, have*

compassion on us and help us."

Let's pause here for a moment and enter *viscerally* into the suffering and desperation of the father up to this point. He has seen his son have near-fatal convulsions *often* (v. 22). Moreover, in Luke's account of this incident he says it is the father's only son.

Imagine what it would be like for that father over the years to try to care for and protect his son, yet feeling so helpless, so impotent to relieve his beloved son's suffering. Some of you may know that journey yourself.

As a father myself I can tell you no father can handle much of that. My point is, this is really is an emotionally and psychologically intense and pain-forged situation. So now given the apparent failure of Jesus' disciples the father asks Jesus to act, but he does so with a degree of uncertainty: 'If Jesus, You are able to do something can you help us?'

Let me ask you this, Has unresolved and repeated pain ever made *your* faith a bit uncertain over time? Sometimes Like a slow drip on a rock our disappointments accrue and accrue and wear down our faith, don't they?

Like that bonus from work we thought was a sure thing, *but* never came. The job we thought we would land, *but* never got. The healing we thought would come quickly, *but* we remain in pain. The relationship we thought would exceed expectations, *but* ended in a disaster. All these “*buts*” when piled up start to wear down a person’s faith. After a while it starts to feel like it just hurts too much to hope too much. Ever feel like that?

Yet this father, some-where beneath the disappointments of that day and the pain of the years, clung to a thin thread of faith in Jesus. So he tries one more time to gain healing for his son. “If you are able to do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” And then Jesus picks up on his verbiage in His answer to the father (V. 23): “*If you are able... (I wonder if Jesus says this with a wry smile) All things can be done for the one who believes.*” And then here is what really fascinates me about this whole dialogue.

Almost impulsively without hedging or pretending to be a pillar of faith, and likely with tears in his eyes a strain in his voice, we hear one of the most common and relatable statements in all of the scriptures: (verse 24) “*Immediately the father of the child cried out, “I believe; help my unbelief!”*”

The father doesn’t just mumble this out, but “cries out.” The expression often means to shout out. In other words, this is definitely an intense and loud expression of desperation. Can you hear that voice? Can you feel that voice?

Let me make a couple of quick points.

First of all, I am totally impressed by the father’s authenticity his integrity. No pious smoke screen here. No pretense or pretending how spiritual he is. Just the bare naked truth of where he stood in that moment.

Don’t you love folks like that totally real? How many times do we Christians find ourselves *feigning* some sort of spiritual strength when we actually feel so weak.

There have been more than a few times in *my own journey* with God where I have gone through a season where I felt God’s absence. And I have had people in those times come up to me and ask how I’m *really* doing. And know you what sometimes happens? I stand there as a pastor, as a man who is supposed to be a pillar of faith *and* integrity and throw out a hypocritical “I’m just Great!” What a bunch of baloney!

Why do we do that? Why among the *Christian community* do we find so often, perhaps too often, hiddenness or pretense? Why are we not the most open and authentic people the world has ever met? We men often struggle with hiddenness and pretense don’t we? We find it a great challenge to open up about the things that plague us.

Let me put in a shameless plug for the men’s ministry here. In that ministry we have leaders that are dedicated to being real. If you men come on Thursday nights or to our retreats you will meet men who can be strikingly and refreshingly honest and real. Why are we committed to that standard of being real? Because we know we can *only* heal and grow as men of God through the truth!

We know we cannot heal what we don’t reveal. We cannot fix what we will not face, we cannot over-come what we overlook.

As writer James Baldwin has said: “*Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.*” And nothing would get better with *this* man until he stood soulfully bare before Jesus and blurted out the truth of his deepest condition: “I believe. Help my unbelief!”

You see, Jesus is not just wanting to heal the boy, but also the father; To instill in him a rock solid faith and hope he has never known before, but *before* that can take place the truth of his soul had to be laid bare before the Savior. Can we do the same with each other? What is the cost to our journeys with Jesus if we cannot?

This is the second thing I want to point out about this dialogue.

The seemingly ambivalent words of the father have long been the journey of the people of God throughout scripture. When we look in the book of Psalms written thousands of years ago we often see words and journeys like the father we see in our story today. Let me read from Psalm 22 and see you if you hear the ambivalence of faith and doubt, belief and unbelief.

Psalms 22: *“My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Why are You so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? ² Every day I call to You, my God, but You do not answer. Every night You hear my voice, but I find no relief. I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me.” Can You hear the pain, the fear the doubting if God is still with*

him? Anyone relate to any of that?”

Yet amidst all this the writer *also* proclaims these things:

“²³You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of Him, all you offspring of Israel!

²⁴For He did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; He did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him”

Notice the wrestling match. Feeling forsaken, far from God and not heard, and yet at the very same time, having faith that God will face me and hear me in my cries for help. And this is just like this father in our story. *Even in the midst of his feelings of doubt and pain and disappointment he also has faith: “I believe, help my unbelief”*

Have you been to that place of “I believe in You and I question You.” That place of, “I’m not sure You are *here with me* in this. I’m not sure you are here in this struggling relationship; here in my confusion about my future; here In the pressures that I’m feeling from my career demands, here in my ailing health. I’m just not sure.

Have you been to that ambivalent place with Jesus? And what does Jesus do with

this man’s ambivalence? Does Jesus walk away until the father got it straightened out and then help him? No. Jesus delivers the boy from his demonic torture right there in the midst of the father’s belief and unbelief.

He brings the blessing of the kingdom of God. And perhaps because of this story, or stories like this, Jude writes in his brief letter: “Be *merciful* to those who doubt” (v. 22). Given how often we are exhorted in the New Testament to be people of faith why do we have this gracious plea to be merciful to those who doubt? Why even include this if having faith is so central to our lives with God? Let me give you two quick things:

First, sometimes if we deal well with them doubts can transform us for good. Sometimes pain, doubt, and fear, etc. often create questions we may have never considered before, so they end up stretching us. They motivate seeking where we had once been settled. They open a soul that may have been numb to the realities of suffering in our world. Sometimes our confusion opens our minds to new perspectives we have never had before, and opens our hearts to hear God’s voice anew in a way we never heard it before.

How many of us who have finally come out of the other side of pain and doubt come to the realization, "I thought I understood this life with God, *but now* I understand it on a whole different level." But to give such growth a chance to arise in people's lives we need to be merciful, we need to give space and time and help to those who have doubts.

Second, perhaps we are encouraged to give mercy to those who doubt because if we Christians are *not merciful* to what is the experience of every follower of God at some point in their journey, then the church will be reduced to hiddenness, pretense, and phoniness. And perhaps most importantly, we will suffer from the *lack of resolution* to the doubts that plague us.

When we *can't* be merciful to those who doubt because of normal things like anger, sorrow, frustration and doubt then those things end up hidden, downplayed or even silenced. And if we end up trying to deny these very important, and very normal aspects of being human, of being a Christian it can leave us with more pain.

If we want doubt to go away we don't submerge it or deny it. We face it, walk into it *with others* and deal with it. Now to be honest not, all of us do well when we listen to the spiritual or emotional

chaos, pain, and stubborn doubts in the lives of others. Sometimes for some folks the strong negative feelings of others feel overwhelming and we are left feeling stuck as to know how to walk with that person.

So let me offer some help here. Of all the things I can suggest to help others work through doubt and maybe even find healing, let me suggest just a couple of things.

First, listen and empathize and resist the urge to theologize or give scripture that *contradicts* someone's pain. For example, when someone feels ignored by God it may not help to respond with, "The Lord says in His word, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.'" As theologically correct and as well-intended as that use of scripture is it will more than likely *not help* because it could serve to *invalidate* the person's visceral or emotional experience.

You see the reality of a lot of folks is like the words of one pastor, who said at the funeral of his 24-year-old son, "*While the words of the Bible are true, grief renders them unreal*" (William Coffin). This is so crucial to understand as we seek to serve and minister to people who have gone through the ringer.

If we only try to address the rational intellect of a hurting, scared, and confused person and we do not address the pained emotional aspect of the person we may not end up helping them. Why? Because the person will feel, "You don't get me and what I'm going through." If you want to help people through a change of heart then empathy and listening, as *first responses*, go a long way.

Look how Jesus asks the father in verse 21: "So tell Me your story? How long is this been going on?" Jesus could have healed the boy without asking this question. Yet in the midst of this intense situation (remember the boy has already show signs of demon possession) Jesus wants to *first* listen.

Science has shown us that people are more open to change their mind *after* at least three things are experienced: People need to *first* feel Heard, Understood, and Validated. In other words they need to feel "*You get me.*" To validate someone's doubt or anger at God is not the same thing as agreeing with them. It's just expressing "Hey, given what you are going through I can totally understand why you can feel pretty ignored by God right now; why you can feel angry at Him."

When we validate someone's grief and pain then the words of the scriptures can become real again.

Very often doubt is not due to some intellectual wall in the persons mind. It is often rooted in emotional wounds, emotional scars in their life. The doubt of this father was *not* an Intellectual Doubt but what I call a Pain-Forged Doubt. I can assure you so many people who have doubts have Pain-Forged Doubts, not intellectual ones and so we Christians need to be adept at helping them through this.

Personally, when I am with some hurting people I let them express their pain fully and I empathize with them. Then when I finally see that the person feels like *I get them* only then I might read a lament psalm like Ps. 22 or 6 or 13 or 88. In other words, I give them scripture *first* to *validate* their experience *not* correct it, not to fix it.

Very often when I do that people say, "Yes, *that's exactly* how I feel right now." And *now* they are open to change their hearts. Now they can embrace my assistance. Now the words of the bible can become real again.

As one wise OT theologian wrote, "The first condition of healing is to give voice to pain" (Kathleen

O'Conner), and as Christian philosopher Dallas Willard has said "The first act of love is to listen." Which is *exactly* what is happening between this father and Jesus. Jesus gives this father *listening* space and time to give voice to his pain.

Bottom line, it is difficult to get back to faith unless we first express our pain however theologically incorrect our expressions may be.

So my question is this can *you* be that safe and wise Christian brother or sister with whom that journey of doubt and pain and theological incorrectness can be entrusted? What is the cost to our community if we cannot?

So now how about you? Are you here today with pain-forged doubts? Are you here feeling like you are stumbling through life, trying hard to make sense out of this journey you now find yourself on, but *never intended* to be on? Will you open your wounded heart to the healing power and presence of Jesus? Will you allow the doubts of your mind to be infused with the promises and hope that only Jesus can give?

Maybe you like the writer of Psalm 22 and feel you are living on the corner of Belief and Unbelief. If so, then

listen soulfully to this next song and let the Spirit of God speak to your wounded, doubt-stained, threadbare faith and see what He may be saying to you today.

Song Played: Will You Believe,
Music Copyright © by Gary Rea

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Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: fpchkoolau@gmail.com