

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Fourteenth Sunday After Trinity, September 18, 2022

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 18, 65:1, 342, 321, 345:4.

Lessons: Psalm 103, Romans 10:1-17, Luke 9:37-43a.

Sermon Text: Mark 9:14-29.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

This is one of those sermon texts which is packed with lessons. It isn't just a simple story of healing. There's too much here for just one sermon. Many lessons can be found here.

This miracle is recorded in three gospels. Jesus heals a boy possessed with an evil spirit which made him behave like one suffering severe epileptic seizures.

A man had brought his son to Jesus' disciples to be healed. But they had not been able to heal him. Because of these seizures he would often fall into the fire or into water. It was a severe case caused by an evil spirit, the power of the devil. The poor father had pleaded with the disciples to help with this affliction, but they had not been able to help.

We hear from Jesus' words that this father at first didn't have faith that Jesus could heal the boy either. One lesson we can learn today is

BELIEVE IN JESUS FOR THE BIG THINGS, TOO!

- 1. A man doubts Jesus can help with earthly healing.**
- 2. Jesus heals the earthly problem,**
- 3. But Jesus also heals the eternal problem: sin.**

Mark so far has recorded 15 specific miracles and on three occasions reported that Jesus healed many people. On this day Jesus performs another miracle.

This terribly afflicted boy needed healing which only Jesus could give. His father had first brought him to the disciples of Jesus. Jesus had just been up on the mountain where his transfiguration had taken place with three of his apostles with him. When he came down, Jesus was confronted with scribes, teachers in the law, arguing with his disciples. The disciples had tried to heal the boy and failed and the scribes, delighted with the failure, taunted them with it.

After the father complained to Jesus, Jesus says to all those present "*O unbelieving generation,*" ... "*how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?*" This admonition also applies to the disciples who by their inability to heal the boy, show a lack of faith in the power and authority given to them by Jesus. Scripture tells us that Jesus had previously given "*them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases.*" Luke 9:1 (NIV) But on this occasion they had not been able to do that. Jesus later met privately with his disciples and talked about this.

When he comes down from the mountain Jesus comes face to face again with the suffering in this world caused by sin. Jesus' words are really directed to all those present: to the crowd, to the father and to the disciples. The crowd is always ready to marvel at wonders done by Jesus but shows no real faith. The father admits his littleness of faith as Mark reports he told Jesus "*if you can do anything.*"

And Jesus is clearly irritated by this unbelieving and perverse generation. On the mountain of transfiguration, he had just received strengthening from his heavenly Father and from Moses and Elijah. Now he is back in the sin-filled world. These are the people for whom he is willingly going to the cross.

The father describes his child's condition characterized by symptoms similar to what we call severe forms of epilepsy. But this is also an obvious case of demon possession. An evil spirit dominated this child's life. From what Jesus says, the disciples obviously had not prayed and didn't have enough faith in God. Did they have too much faith in their own abilities? Had they felt 'the master did it, why can't we?' and thus didn't pray for God's help, which is the only power that can heal in this way?

The father speaks up, and he really says what many people are thinking when he asks Jesus to heal his son: ***"If you can."*** He doubts Jesus' power. He does not have faith that Jesus can heal his son. In essence the man is saying 'God, you didn't do what I wanted!' He relied on men, and from what Jesus says, he didn't rely on God in prayer – nor did Jesus' disciples.

But Jesus heals the boy. He invites the father to bring his son and at that very moment the boy is seized by another convulsion. The evil spirit knows that his control over this child is coming to an end. Jesus' love and compassion does not fail. ***"When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the boy's father, 'How long has he been like this?' 'From 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.'"***

Scripture records the details of the healing in order to bring out all the more strongly the healing power of the Lord in contrast to the destructive power of the devil. Satan had taken possession of the boy in early childhood. He had not prevented his physical growth, but had given every other evidence of his hateful presence by causing the boy to throw himself into fire, in order to be burned to death, and into water, in order to be drowned.

We can certainly believe that many things even today, including things like depression, despair, mental illness, severe attacks of illness and physical ailments and even other things, are due to the hatred of Satan. These kinds of things even today are caused or aggravated by the devil. He is a murderer from the beginning and has only one thing in mind, to destroy the creatures of God.

But it is obvious from this incident that the devil has only so much power over the bodies of men as God permits him to have. The father appeals to Christ with a sincere request, but unfortunately he qualified and weakened it by saying: ***"if you can do anything."*** Here unbelief was fighting with belief. The man was not quite certain in his trust in Jesus. There was doubt in his mind about Jesus' ability to help.

Jesus corrects this feeling. When the man says ***"But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us"*** Jesus replies ***"If you can?"*** ***"Everything is possible for him who believes."*** What comforting words! ***"Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, 'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!'"***

These words had the desired effect with the doubting father. It opened his eyes to his lack of faith. In deep humility he cries out: I believe; come to the assistance of my unbelief!

When Jesus met privately later with his disciples, Matthew records these words: ***"'Why couldn't we drive it out?'" He replied, 'Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, "Move from here to there" and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.'*** Matthew 17:19-20 (NIV) Those words are deserving of another sermon! Just look at the benefits of prayer and faith! And how does faith grow? Listen to Paul talking to us in the letter to the Romans: ***"So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."*** Romans 10:17 (KJV)

This man's struggle with faith and unbelief is at times really found in the heart of all Christians.

Jesus healed this boy and strengthened his father's faith in God. Jesus also strengthened the faith of his disciples, and who knows how many others! But Jesus gives much greater healing. He came to heal a world sick to death – eternal death – because of the disease of sin. The man's doubt and unbelief is a symptom of a greater problem.

As in the heart of all Christians, belief and unbelief were battling in this man's heart. But now faith and trust in the Lord were supreme. He trusts entirely in the help of Christ, also against that evil of unbelief that pops its head up repeatedly. On the part of God ***"Everything is possible for him who believes"*** if the believer will but accept by faith what God has long ago prepared for him and enabled him to receive through help from above.

Jesus gives the direct command to the unclean spirit to leave and to stay out. The devil must obey, but he makes his one last attack. He throws the boy into such terrible convulsions that he fell down as if he were dead,

and many thought that the boy was dead. But when Jesus took him by the hand, he could readily get up and stand. Thus the glory of God was displayed in this miracle. The Son of God had again triumphed over the devil.

There is lasting comfort in this fact for all believers who put their trust unwaveringly in Christ, the Son of the living God. Even though the devil should succeed in killing the body, the soul is safe in the hands of the heavenly Father.

Jesus can do more than just heal people like this boy. He heals from sin. Even for those who believe that Jesus redeemed them, we see the importance of a continuing firm reliance in God's power and promises. For if such trusting faith is present, though it be as small as a single grain of mustard-seed by comparison, it can move mountains.

By serious, believing prayer the devil can always be defeated. James assures us that ***"The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."*** James 5:16 (KJV) Such prayer implies full reliance upon God and his help. The disciples, who formerly had driven out devils in the name and by the power of the Lord, here had probably attempted a cure by their own strength. It was trust in their own ability that had caused them to stumble and fall. The devil can be conquered only by a prayer rooted in faith and receiving its power from God alone.

Nothing is impossible to such faith. If we have God's command and promise in what we undertake, then we should firmly rely upon his almighty strength, knowing that we shall be able to perform what he has given us to do. Things that seem impossible in the eyes of men have been carried out successfully because of a firm reliance in the help of the Lord above. The more difficult the question that confronts the Christian, the more firmly he must cling to God's promises.

Whether Satan be actually present in the form of a very malignant and baffling disease, or whether he attempts to hinder the work of Christ in His Church with all kinds of obstructions, earnest, devout prayer is an ally that can be depended upon to secure the needed help from above, to put the enemy to flight, and to gain the day for the cause of Christ.

The believer is also troubled by the words of Jesus at this point: ***"O unbelieving and perverse generation,"*** people who have no faith and consistently go the wrong way! 'How long must I be with you and tolerate you?' includes everyone, every sinner, and that is all of us! That was characteristic even of the chosen people of God at that time. They were rejecting the Messiah of their salvation or following false leads and hopes in their dream of an earthly kingdom.

But the power of the evil spirit also in this case, as always, goes only as far as Jesus permits it. Once more the greatness of God is displayed. Jesus shows his power over Satan and his evil spirits.

But we must know – and remember what we have learned from Holy Scripture – that Jesus provides eternal healing. He heals the sin sick heart.

Mankind – you and I too – have much greater problems than the physical problems this boy had: sin which clings to us and without God's help would drown us and throw us into the eternal fires of hell.

This boy's illness caused him to be thrown into the fire. But sin is a much greater problem. Sin causes mankind to be thrown into the eternal fires of hell. But Jesus has the solution. He suffered the pains of eternal hellfire so that we don't have to.

And how is that made ours? Through saving faith, not through unbelief. Not through doubting. And in addition to saving faith in Jesus as our Redeemer, we must also have faith in what God can do. We dare not doubt that God can do what he says he can do. Remember what the Psalmist told us: ***"Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits – who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases."*** Psalm 103:2-3 (NIV)

May we never forget the eternal healing Jesus brought for all mankind, and rejoice that it is ours and give it away so that others, too, may come to eternal life. Amen.