

“I Believe! Help My Unbelief”

Mark 9:14-29

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Some Bible stories seem to be more powerful than others. The ones that are most powerful for me are the ones in which I can locate myself. If I can't see myself in the story, it's more difficult to feel the story's relevance. That's not to say that some of the stories aren't relevant; it's just that some are more obviously relevant. The story for today from Mark's Gospel introduces us to a character I like right away. I hope you do, too! He is a dad. He loves his child as much as anything else in his life. He would do anything to help his boy. When the boy has a seizure, the dad suffers along with him. The father's anguish is palpable. Everyone should have such a parent who cares this much, who empathizes so deeply.

Having taken the child to all the doctors and having tried all the known remedies, this dad, finally, in desperation, brings the child to Jesus. He says to Jesus, “If you are able, have mercy on the child and help us.” **Then comes the turning point in the story.** Jesus seizes upon this moment as a teaching opportunity. He could have just healed the child, worked a miracle, and gone on with his journey. But, instead, he turns back to the parent and says in a challenging voice: “If **you** are able! All things can be done for the one who believes.”

Now this is what we call high drama. It is a moment of truth. Those in the audience are on the edge of their seats. How will the father respond? At this moment, the father becomes a quintessential confirmation student. He has to come up with a faith statement. It has to be his own faith statement. It must come from the heart. It must have a ring of integrity.

So, he blurts out loud what I would describe as his best effort at a faith statement,

“I BELIEVE! HELP MY UNBELIEF.”

He is brutally honest. He has faith and he has doubt. He is up front about both. This is why I like him so much. I can relate to this guy! I can locate myself in his shoes.

What Jesus responds to is the man's integrity, the man's honesty. I picture them standing eyeball to eyeball. The man is a mix of emotion: fear and hope, dread and possibility, exhaustion and exuberance, faith and doubt. He wears no masks. He comes to Jesus just as he is. What Jesus sees in this man's face is a parent's unconditional love for the child. What Jesus sees is a man who wants to believe but doesn't quite know how to believe. And that is enough. That is enough to work a miracle.

“I BELIEVE! HELP MY UNBELIEF.”

All things become a possibility when there is even an ounce of faith, a micro-organism of faith, an infinitesimal atom of faith. Even a desire for faith is enough for Jesus to work with. I would say that this story is this man's Confirmation day. It's the boy who is healed, but it's the dad whose faith journey gets a jump start. Before there is any real reason for him to believe, he believes. He believes because he is invited to believe. And that is where the life of faith begins.

No one can force you to believe or command you to believe or tell you to believe. One can only invite you to believe. And the invitation comes with a promise. “All things can be done for the one who believes.” That may be the most outrageous pronouncement that has ever been made in the history of humankind. “All things can be done for the one who believes.”

This doesn't mean that belief is some sort of magic. "Presto! And all things happen!" It means that believing in God creates a spiritual environment in which hope has a chance to thrive, in which the light begins to penetrate the darkness, in which something new can be born. I have sent out thousands of invitations in my life: to graduation ceremonies, to family weddings, to dinner parties, to outdoor experiences, to participate in the Confirmation class; but the only one that really matters is the invitation to believe. If you remember nothing else of my time here at South Church, remember that I invited you to believe.

At the 10:30 service, the choir is singing "Amazing Grace." I waver back and forth over which is my favorite verse. Today, I am tuning in to the second verse:

**'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
and grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
the hour I first believed.'**

Though this hymn was written by John Newton whose story has been made into a full length motion picture, Amazing Grace could well have been written by the dad in Mark's Gospel story. Having pronounced his desire to believe, he then witnesses what he could not have imagined possible: his son is restored to life. The demon that had robbed the boy of his dignity has been driven away. We aren't told what becomes of the child; whether he graduates from high school and goes to college, whether he becomes a social worker and works with challenged children, whether he becomes a disciple. But it doesn't really matter to the storyteller. What matters is the difference it makes whenever any of us chooses to believe. That decision creates a fertile ground for God to plant something awesome, something wonderful, something new.

"I BELIEVE! HELP MY UNBELIEF."

The dad in this story gives all of us what we need to remain in the greatest of hope! Amen.