

“I Believe; Help My Unbelief”

In the name of him who makes all things possible for those who trust in him, dear friends in Christ: In order to appreciate what's going on in today's Gospel reading, it's necessary to back up a bit. Leaving nine of his disciples behind, Jesus had taken Peter, James, and John, and together they'd spent at least half the day climbing up a high mountain. Worn out from their strenuous exercise, upon reaching the top the three disciples who formed the inner circle of Jesus' followers collapsed in a heap and promptly fell asleep. No doubt to avoid having his concentration disturbed by their snoring, Jesus stepped aside some distance to pray to his heavenly Father. When the disciples awoke, they beheld a marvelous sight. The Lord Jesus was being transfigured before them. Rays of supernaturally bright light were emanating from him, and the disciples saw him deep in conversation with Moses and Elijah, the famed prophets of old. The three were enraptured by the vision. It held their astonished gaze in such a way that they feared it might end. They wanted it to keep going on indefinitely. But then, suddenly, a bright cloud enveloped them, and they heard the thunderous voice of God the Father boom, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." The voice so terrified the disciples that they fell on their faces trembling; but when they looked up again they saw only Jesus, appearing normally, just as he did when they'd come.

Meanwhile, in a village on the plain below, a scene different was unfolding. While their privileged three colleagues were up on the mountain getting a glimpse of heavenly splendor, the other nine disciples were down in the trenches, so to speak, facing an ugly crisis spewed up from the dark pit of hell. A desperate man had brought his demonized son to Jesus hoping to have him delivered from its evil oppression. And what an oppression it was. At all times it effectively rendered his son both deaf and mute, thus isolating him from everything but the simplest forms of communication with others. And if that weren't bad enough, at unpredictable intervals the demon would take hold of the young man and throw him into what were like grand mal seizures. He'd go stiff and fall down, and then roll about convulsing violently, grinding his teeth, and frothing at the mouth. Even worse, the malicious demon would come upon him in this way especially when he could throw his host into a fire or pool of water in an effort to destroy him. It's impossible to imagine the horrors of mind and body to which this young man was continuously subject by his invisible tormentor, or the heartbreak his parents must have endured to have long seen their son so abused.

But then the father had heard reports about Jesus. If only half of them were true, there might be a chance. And so when he heard that Jesus was in the vicinity, he brought his son to this village seeking him – only to be disappointed to discover that the famous healing Rabbi was not immediately available. He'd left before daybreak with several of his disciples, and no one knew when he might return. And so it was that he made his heartrending appeal to the nine disciples who remained. "For the love of God, please, do something to help us."

This was reasonable. The disciples had some experience delivering people who were demonized. Earlier Jesus had given them the authority to perform miracles of healing and to cast out unclean spirits. Jesus had sent them out on a mission to do just that. And later, when they returned to him, they rejoiced that they'd been successful, saying how that even the demons were subject to them in his name. Now, while that's true, none of them had ever encountered a case quite as severe as this; and as a result they were intimidated. Even so, they must also have seen it as something of a challenge – an opportunity to see just how much power they did possess. And since Jesus was away, they probably saw it also as an

opportunity to come out from under the shadow of their teacher and showcase their own spiritual prowess.

So they gave it their best shot. All of them did, apparently; perhaps repeatedly. And the result was a spectacular failure. We aren't given the details; but it's not hard to imagine how with each subsequent failed attempt their confidence would have steadily crumbled while their efforts would have grown more theatric and desperate. To complicate matters, their failed attempts brought them under the attack of the small horde of vicious detractors who were ever present to spy on Jesus and bring discredit to his ministry. These were scribes and Bible scholars sent by Jesus' enemies, the religious authorities in Jerusalem. They were there to keep tabs on Jesus for their masters, and, whenever possible, to try to turn the crowd away from him. The disciples' failure to drive out the demon gave them a perfect opportunity to do this, and they were using it to maximum advantage – not that they could do anything themselves to help the young man; but hey, it's always easier to sit on the sideline and criticize than to do something constructive.

So, picture the scene: in the center of a large crowd you've got the flustered and humiliated disciples. They feel helpless and look like fools for attempting the deliverance they could not pull off. Close by are the desperate father and son. For his part, the son is as unresponsive as ever; but the father is deeply disappointed. He came hoping for a miracle that would save his son and he's been let down hard. He feels foolish for having held out hope, and no doubt angry with the disciples for their failure to do what they said they could. Around them is the rest of the crowd with the scribes and religious scholars closest to the disciples. They mock the disciples and laugh at them for their failure. And they egg on the crowd to join them in denouncing Jesus and his followers as fakes and false prophets. It's not a pretty scene.

But it is, nevertheless, the scene that Jesus and the three disciples with him come upon when they return from their trip up the mountain. And seeing Jesus arrive, some of the outer fringes of the crowd break off. They come running up to Jesus. They're shouting all at once – it's a cacophony of voices and confusion; but mostly I suspect that they're hoping for some high drama in the form of a showdown between Jesus and his opponents. The crowd's got their blood up and they're spoiling for a fight.

The mob around the disciples parts like the Red Sea as Jesus strolls forward to get to the center of then action. He asks them, "What's all this commotion about?" The shamefaced disciples are as mute as the young man they failed to rescue. They hang their heads, unwilling to respond or even to look Jesus in the eye. It falls to the heartbroken father to answer. "I brought my son to you, for he is afflicted terribly by a spirit. I asked your disciples to cast it out; but they did not have the strength."

If the nine disciples were hoping that Jesus would take their side, they were sadly mistaken; for what follows are some of the harshest words that Jesus ever said to them. "O faithless generation; how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?" They are words of deep disappointment. And what he blames is not their lack of power; but their lack of faith. He even seems surprised about it. It reminds us that elsewhere Jesus marveled at people's capacity for unbelief. The very concept is foreign to him. Just as it would have been impossible for Jesus to hold in his mind a sinful thought of lust or greed, it was equally impossible for him to doubt the truthfulness and power of God's Word. He, the Lord, had given them authority over unclean spirits in his name. As far as Jesus was concerned, that settled it. It was that simple. And they failed because they did not believe it.

Why not? There were several factors involved. The first is that this particular spirit manifested itself in such a violent and frightening way. It unnerved them. It made them fear; and fear is always born of doubt. The second is that Jesus was away. They were on their own, or so they thought. If he had been here, they might have immediately referred the case to him; but that was not an option. They had to do it on their own. And that led to the third factor: instead of trusting in the authority Jesus had given them, each one looked to himself and asked, "Can I do this? Do I have the power?" And the sinful pride in them answered, "Sure I can. I've done it before. I can do it again. And boy, won't that look good on me?"

In today's Epistle, James warns that not many should seek to become teachers of God's Word because they will be judged with a stricter standard. And this is the great temptation of a teacher: that he begins to rely on himself, his own talents and abilities, his charisma and powers of persuasion, rather than on the power of God's Word. When that happens, the teacher is thinking more about himself than the powerful Word of Christ that he proclaims. He's trusting in himself rather than in Christ. And if that continues, it will change his message. It must. His ministry will become more about "me and my followers" and less about pointing people to Jesus and making disciples for him.

Having rebuked his disciples for their misplaced trust and lack of faith in him, Jesus proceeds to put the focus of faith back where it belongs: on himself – the powerful Word of God in human flesh and blood. He summons the father and demonized son to come to him. Seeing that its time is short, the spirit puts on an especially terrible display of its control over the young man. It hopes to instill fear and despair, that is, lack of faith in everyone present – even in Jesus, if it were possible. But it's not. As the young man undergoes his violent spasms and the crowd around him backs up in dismay, Jesus asks in a doctor's calm, clinical tone, "How long has he had these symptoms?" "Ever since childhood", the father responds, "but for pity's sake, if you can do something about it, show us some compassion! Help us now!"

"If you can"? Jesus asks. And in so doing he puts his finger on the problem; because the "if" betrays a lack of faith in God's power and perhaps also in his love, mercy, and care for the people he created. When it comes to such things, there is no "if" with God. He is all powerful. And he is infinitely loving and merciful. Again, Jesus is marveling that anyone could doubt it. "All things", he says, "are possible to him who believes." And these words of Christ create faith in the man's desperate and disappointed heart. They light the spark of belief. And they give him the capacity also to see that he is torn. On one hand he does trust the Word of God spoken to him by Jesus, and at the same time he struggles with doubt. "Maybe he can't do it. Maybe he won't. Maybe I'll be let down again" he thinks. "And that'll hurt all the worse for my having got my hopes up again." But seeing this conflict in himself, the man speaks what is the most profound confession and helpful prayer that a struggling sinner can possibly make. "I do believe; Jesus, help my unbelief."

Throughout this long season of Pentecost, we've been talking a lot about Christian sanctification – that is, the progressive growth toward godliness of life that should be taking place in every believer. And up until now, we've been describing it as the war that takes place inside us Christians between our new nature, that's the one brought to life by the power of the Holy Spirit that desires to do God's will, and our sinful old nature, that's the one we're born with that selfishly seeks its own way and its own good. This morning's text reveals that another way to look at it is as the conflict in you between the believer and the unbeliever. The believer in you trusts Christ and looks to him for deliverance and everything that's good. The unbeliever in you doubts Christ and turns your trust either to yourself ("I have to do this on my own – I have to take care of myself") or to some other source ("maybe this thing can help me"). And when you do this, you effectively make a god of whatever it is you turn your trust to – because that's what

you're looking to for help. The trouble with all such "gods" is that they have limitations. They are merely created things. Sure, there're things they can do; but at some point they must fail. Only God has no limitations. For him nothing is impossible. And so when all is said and done, only he can save from everything that threatens us – especially the things that are bigger and more powerful than we are like sin, death, and the power of the devil. Only the Lord can save from such threats as these – as Jesus handily demonstrates by casting out this unusually powerful and persistent demon.

All this is made even clearer when later, alone with Jesus in the house, the disciples ask him why they failed to cast out the demon. Jesus replies, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer." Now, I know that at this point some teachers will start talking about the amazing "power of prayer"; but that would be exactly the wrong thing to do. To speak of the "power of prayer" turns the focus back to the one who is praying. It makes *my prayer* the object of my faith. And then if I don't immediately get the answer I want, I'm forced to ask, "Am I praying well enough? Am I praying sincerely enough? Am I praying hard enough?" It's still about *me* and what *I* do. That's where my faith is – in the so-called "power" of my prayer. Listen: prayer is not powerful. The One to whom we pray is. A proper prayer arises from recognizing that I don't have the power to do *anything* by myself, so I'm turning my trust to the One who has all power, trusting that he is full of compassion and longs to hear and answer the prayers of those who trust in him. For someone with faith like that, all things are possible.

And that raises the question: What is it in your life as a Christian that up to this point you have found impossible? In particular, what besetting sin or evil desire have you found too difficult to overcome? What temptation is it that, though you struggle mightily with it, in the end it gets you every time? Or conversely, what good and godly goal has up to now eluded you? You've sought to be kinder, more patient, more forgiving, more compassionate, more generous, more loving toward strangers, more open toward sharing your faith, or whatever; but you find that you just can't do it. Do you imagine for a moment that the Lord doesn't want such things for you? Of course he does. Then why isn't it happening? Jesus gives the answer: "O faithless generation!" You don't believe. It's that simple. Your trust is in something other than in Jesus. You've got yourself another god – a god that has no power.

See that. Believe that. Repent of it. And turn your trust to Jesus through whom all things *are* possible. Ask him to help. He will. In fact, he longs to do what you know is impossible for you because his power is most shown in your weakness. It's precisely where you say, "I can't do it" that he says, "That's right. You can't. But I can. Trust me, for then nothing is impossible." And do this knowing that your failures past, present, and future are not obstacles to him. For in answer to his rhetorical question, "How long am I to be with you?" he has promised, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" and "I will never leave you nor forsake you". And in answer to his question, "How long am I to bear with you?" well, he answered that question when he took upon himself the penalty of all your failures, all your sins, and all your unbelief, and he was nailed to the cross. There he proved that his forgiveness and love is infinite for those who repent and turn to him in trust.

The only thing holding us back from making us to be the disciples he would have us be and from experiencing the fullness of his power to improve our lives, is a lack of faith. Therefore let this always be our prayer, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief"; for then all things are possible. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!