

"Help For Our Unbelief"
Mark 9:14-29
Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D
Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church/Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church
July 23, 2023

I've just returned from two weeks of study leave from what has become my refuge, my home away from home for the past thirty-seven years- the Chautauqua Institute in southwestern NY. For those of you who have never heard of Chautauqua, it is a community on the shores of Chautauqua Lake that comes alive for nine weeks each summer with a unique mix of fine and performing arts, lectures, concerts, interfaith worship and programs, and recreational activities. During that time, more than 100,000 visitors will visit the grounds and participate in programs, classes and community events for all ages- all within the beautiful setting of a historic lakeside village. Each week--including the worship and lectures--is built around a particular theme with the theme for this past week being "the state of believing" and what it is that science, religion, public opinion and politics can teach us about the nature of what we believe and why.

Each week begins with Sunday worship in the great amphitheater and the preacher for this past one was Craig Barnes. That name that may be familiar to some of you as he was the Senior Pastor of the Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh before assuming the presidency of Princeton Theological Seminary for the past decade. Every morning, Dr. Barnes spoke on the theme of healing, focusing his sermons on some particular act of healing performed by Jesus during the course of his ministry. I was inspired enough by his message last Sunday to want to preach on the same text to you this morning.

Now the matter of faith interjects itself in almost everything we do here in church on Sundays. We recite creeds like the Apostles' Creed which expound on it; we sing hymns about its glories; we hear sermons about its centrality in our lives; and we never stop praying that whatever faith we DO have may grow stronger in the process. When I was in college, we used to sing all the time until it became a kind of mantra, "Only believe, only believe, all things are possible, only believe..." Yet, how many of us can say we TRULY understand what faith—REAL, DEEP CHRISTIAN faith--actually consists of. We all have so many different ideas of what the term may mean or even how to express it.

For instance, a letter was auctioned off for more than \$400,000 in London that the great theoretical physicist Albert Einstein had written to the philosopher Eric Gutkind back in 1954. In it, he spoke of his faith (or perhaps lack thereof), describing belief in God as "childish superstition." He told Gutkind, "The word God is for me nothing more than the expression and product of human weaknesses, the Bible a collection of honourable, but still primitive legends which are nevertheless pretty childish. No interpretation no matter how subtle can (for me) change this." In his autobiographical notes, he had said that he lost his religion at the age of twelve and he never looked back.

But what Einstein had NOT lost was his religious feeling about the apparent order of the universe or his intuitive connection with its mystery which he savored. As he wrote in another letter that same year, "If something is in me that can be called religious, then it is the unbounded

admiration for the structure of the world so far as science can reveal it.” Although he adamantly rejected the notion of a “personal” God, he resented being labeled an atheist for he found THEM to be every bit as narrow and intolerant as religious fundamentalists. He said that atheists “are creatures who, in their grudge against the traditional ‘opium for the people,’ cannot bear the music of the spheres.” The problem of God, he said, “is too vast for our limited minds.” Hence, he seemed to affirm a notion of God as a kind of life force or principle that permeates and undergirds all things, creating some kind of mysterious coherence. If there was no room for a PERSONAL God in Einstein’s universe, there seems to have been one for a kind of PANTHEISTIC god that inhabits all matter and makes it all work together.

It’s certainly true that people are finding it increasingly harder to believe in those traditional symbols, creeds, and rituals that have defined Christian faith for the past two thousand years. The findings of a recent Pew poll showed that the percentage of Americans who identify as Christian has fallen from 77 percent to 65 percent, while the percentage of Nones has risen from 17 percent to 26 percent. This decline is particularly acute among Millennials, of whom only 46 percent identify as religious. The fact is that increasing numbers of people no longer claim to be religious but instead NOW opt to refer to themselves as “spiritual.” They’ve essentially given up on organized religion with its assorted creeds and practices in favor of some kind of generalized, privatized, and individualistic experience that they believe is God inspired.

For many, the idea of a personal God is no longer rationally tenable, and for some, the very mention of it even seems SCANDALOUS. If I’ve heard it once, I’ve heard it a thousand times: “If God is so good, then WHY does God allow cyclones to ravage portions of southeast Asia that kill upwards of half a million persons and leave millions more homeless; WHY the earthquake in Haiti a decade ago that took the lives of two hundred thousand men, women and children in only a few minutes time; or the tidal wave that struck Fukushima, Japan which left thousands dead and led to a complete nuclear meltdown?” The idea that a good God would continue to allow such terrible tragedy and suffering to persist among his children means that either God is powerless to do anything about it or else this same God just doesn’t care as much as we THINK he does. It’s THESE kinds of questions that are causing people to reconsider their faith or perhaps opt for a religion that in their opinion promotes a much kinder, gentler god.

Well this morning’s text offers us a window into the nature of faith that few others do, and of a God who cannot appear any MORE kind or gentle than we have here. The account begins with Jesus’s descent from the Mount of Transfiguration accompanied by his inner circle of Peter, James, and John. While on the mount, he had been transformed in the presence of Moses and Elijah in preparation for his upcoming Passion. When they arrive at the bottom of the mount, they encounter a man with a son who suffered from severe epilepsy. His affliction, which many believed was caused by a demon, would often lead him to throw himself into the fire or the water, almost destroying himself. Despite all their efforts, the disciples found that they were unable to heal him. There, in the presence of all those people, Jesus delivers one of his most severe admonishments to them, rebuking his disciples for their lack of faith.

Asking for the young man to be brought to him, Jesus would show them HIMSELF the kind of results that true faith is able to achieve. With deep earnestness, the boy’s father pleaded with him, "But, if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." Jesus’s response

was emphatic. "If you can believe," he says, "ALL things are possible." The father then proceeded to give one of the most interesting responses in all scripture. Without any hesitation, he exclaimed, "Lord, I believe." Mark says that the man's response was IMMEDIATE because he wants us to understand that it wasn't so much a genuine, heartfelt profession of faith that he was making, but rather the reply of one willing to say just about ANYTHING so long as it could get some help for his child. The truth was that he didn't know WHAT to make of this teacher and perhaps even had his doubts about him after watching Jesus' own disciples fail to effectuate a cure. But he was willing to say anything, do anything, BELIEVE anything to have his son healed, such was his love.

Now at this point in the story, you have to imagine a great pause between those two statements, that right after his seemingly bold "profession of faith"- "Lord, I believe," a change of heart took place, a moment of honest self-discovery occurred that led to his impotent confession of faithlessness- "Help thou mine unbelief." Where the first remark, "Lord, I believe" had been glib and off-hand; where he was willing to say just about ANYTHING to get Jesus to heal his son, his second statement, "Help thou mine unbelief" was GENUINE; it came straight from the heart expressing his utter helplessness and extreme discouragement. Perhaps he felt he HAD to say he believed because he was afraid he would be chided the same way Jesus had admonished his own disciples for THEIR lack of faith, that if he said otherwise, Jesus might REFUSE to heal his son. Or maybe he was even a little bit fearful that after having made such a profession of faith, Jesus might possibly say to him, "Alright, if you believe, then use your OWN faith to heal your son- you certainly don't need ME."

The FIRST point this story communicates to us is that faith, REAL faith, is always something visceral, that is, it is located deep down in the gut (or what the Bible refers to as "the heart"). Where BELIEF is often a head exercise, an intellectual decision to embrace a particular notion of God or theology about him, FAITH is something else entirely. If belief is "assent," then faith is "consent." When we say, as in the Apostles' Creed "I believe in God," we mean much more than the mere belief that God exists. Rather, it means we believe in God enough to TRUST him and to COMMIT OUR WAY to him- nothing less. One does not become assured of God simply by weighing the arguments for and against the possibility of God's existence. The WHOLE PERSONALITY must take part- the will and the emotions AS WELL as the intellect. Faith is thus a conviction which has been personally embraced and become a determining factor in one's life.

If the first element of faith is that it is VISCERAL, that is, that it proceeds from out of deepest part of our inward being, then a SECOND element of faith revealed in our lesson is that it requires that we take an honest look at OURSELVES and at GOD. The father in the story had been exposed. Jesus didn't just look AT him, he looked THROUGH him and INTO his heart. In that instant, the father realized he had been unmasked, that it was useless to pretend to have more faith than he had for Jesus could see right through him, right to his motives. The father knew then that he could not lie to him, that he did not need to disguise his true feelings. But I think he ALSO knew that it didn't matter after all, that regardless of whether he had faith or not, Jesus's MAIN concern grew out of pity for him and his plight. His appeal, "Help thou mine unbelief" had been more than a cry of despair- it was a prayer for help and he knew in that

moment that faith or no faith, Jesus was there to answer that prayer. With all pretense thrown to the wind, he knew that he could now come freely and honestly before Christ, doubts and fears and all, and that Jesus would NOT chastise him; he would NOT turn him away!

Well if TRUE faith must be deep, arising from out of the heart, and SECONDLY, requires an open honesty before God and oneself, then a THIRD element of faith is that it begins at the point we feel our own INADEQUACY and, at the same time, the ALL- SUFFICIENCY of Christ himself. In other words, it involves an act of SURRENDER on our part. It requires a certain giving up; it demands a more receptive, relaxed, and submissive relation to reality. At some point in our lives, we are forced to come to the realization that we don't have all the knowledge or resources within ourselves to save ourselves or to change our situation and so we just quit fighting and recognize the existence of that Power which is greater than ourselves and has our best interests at heart. This is an act of great risk for it involves trust; it involves making ourselves vulnerable to that Power, even inviting it to come into and change our lives. However, it must first begin with an admission of powerlessness, the admission of our own finiteness and limitedness. Such surrender is embodied in the first two steps of the Alcoholics Anonymous *Twelve Steps to Recovery* where it says:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol- that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

Thus, without meeting these three preconditions--that faith arises from out of the depths of our innermost being, that it requires us to be absolutely honest before God and ourselves as to our real condition, and that it involves an act of submission or surrender into the hands of Him who is greater than ourselves and who has our best interests at heart--it can't in ANY way be called faith, TRUE faith, CHRISTIAN faith.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of the greatest preachers of the Twentieth Century, said in one of his most famous sermons, "The Importance of Doubting Our Doubts":

...Once more, facing this audience, I feel what I commonly feel when I face worshiping congregations. You look so pious. You are so reverent. You listen so respectfully to scripture and anthem. You sing so earnestly the resounding hymns. Yet I know and you know that in every life there is something else which our worship does not express- doubts, questions, uncertainties, skepticism. Every one of us, facing the Christian faith, must honestly say what the man in the Gospel story said to Jesus: 'Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.'

Fosdick was right, of course- every one of us comes to worship on Sunday mornings troubled with our own set of doubts, questions, uncertainties, and skepticism. Corporately and publicly, we pray the prayers and mouth the hymns and express with great confidence before God and each other, "Yes Lord, I believe." But when we're alone in the silence of our own bedroom or lying in some hospital room with IV tubes running in and out of our body, that's when we become much more HONEST with ourselves and with God; it is then we confess the REST of the father's cry, "Help thou mine unbelief." In this way, EVERY ONE OF US is that desperate, discouraged father- he speaks as our personal representative this morning.

A few years ago, while serving as an interim pastor of a church in our Presbytery, I was visiting a member of the congregation- an elder who had ALREADY spent long two long weeks in the hospital. An infection had taken root in his body and despite all the actions of the doctors and the antibiotics they had prescribed him, it was STILL coursing throughout his system, causing him to worry that he might NEVER leave that hospital facility alive. I was speaking to him about faith and how it is even deeper than any of our doubts, how we can deny God and Jesus with our heads when all the while, on a more FUNDAMENTAL level, our hearts STILL remain committed to God. In a moment of genuine candor, he immediately replied, “Dave, do you REALLY believe that?” I told him I truly did, that even when my OWN faith has failed God, as it often had, I’ve found great comfort in knowing that God’s faith IN ME was INFINITY GREATER than my OWN faith in him; that NOTHING, NOT EVEN MY OWN DOUBTS, could possibly separate me from either his presence or his love. I told him that I was leaving the next day for two weeks at Chautauqua but my very first act upon returning would be to pay him a visit- whether at his home or in that same hospital bed. Unfortunately, after two days away, I received the call I had been dreading, that he had passed away some time during the night. I then immediately began making plans to leave so I could be there for the family and prepare for his funeral.

What our lesson for this morning tells us is that ALL of us live with an admixture of both faith AND doubt, that NOBODY ever PURELY believes or disbelieves. Each of us has experienced at one time or another moments of high faith, when it seemed the gates of hell could not prevail against us. And at other times, all of us have felt the winds of God's Spirit leave the sails of our faith, abandoning us to wonder who this God is or where God is at. But then that’s not exactly a bad place to be in because it is only after we have despaired of ourselves and our own fruitless efforts that we can finally recognize the need to look outside ourselves and straight to the one who can INDEED help us- Jesus Christ. What our lesson shows us is that it does not matter how much faith you may or may not think you possess, but WHAT MATTERS is that there is someone before you who is drawn to your concerns, your fears, your burdens, your tribulation with no other motive than that he loves you and desires to share your load. WHAT MATTERS is that you come to him exactly as you are- with empty hands and an open heart to receive HIS faith. In the same way that the father intercedes in love for the benefit of his epileptic son, so does Jesus intercede in love for the benefit of this desperate father. As the scriptures never stop demonstrating, one doesn’t need “great faith” in God before God will begin to hear us or address our concerns. Rather, we only need faith—REGARDLESS how small--in a “GREAT GOD.” I REPEAT, we don’t need great faith in God, only faith in a GREAT God. Our faith may only be the size of a mustard seed- the smallest unit known at the time. Still, our God will be right there for us for “God’s faith in us is INFINITELY greater than our faith in him could EVER be.”

This morning, God asks us to lay aside all pretense, all confidence in ourselves and our OWN power, and instead come to him empty and tired and helpless and faithless, for such a person, he will NEVER turn away. Faith is really nothing more than the openness, the honesty, and the willingness to come to Christ in our helplessness, our emptiness, our faithlessness, our impotence, our bankruptcy, our vulnerability and then trusting him to do the rest. Don't ever tell yourselves, "If only I had more faith..." That father had no faith; he didn't even know who this

Jesus WAS- only that the one who stood before him understood, and cared, and would not turn him away. Let us pray...

Gracious God, our Heavenly Father, help us to despair of ourselves and our own efforts that we might look to you to become our strength and our shield. Help us to place all our problems, our cares, and our needs into YOUR hands for you know best how to handle them and bring them to some resolution. In this way, we shall then learn the meaning of the word "faith"- TRUE faith, DEEP faith, CHRISTIAN faith. In Christ's name we pray. Amen