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I BELIEVE! HELP MY UNBELIEF!

Mark 9:14-29; Proper 19B; Pentecost 17B; September 14-15, 2024

There's something about today's Gospel Reading that has made it stick in my mind for a long time. A desperate father comes to Jesus looking for help for his son who is possessed by an unclean spirit. What a terrible feeling it is to be a parent with a child and helpless to stop your child's suffering, convulsing, foaming at the mouth, thrown down to thrash around on the ground or into fire or water. That poor family had to deal with this for years and had not gotten any relief. The father brought the boy to Jesus' disciples (the ones He had not taken with Him to the Mount of Transfiguration), but they could not drive out this evil spirit.

Jesus was, once more, confronted with a lack of faith in Him, and He responded to it. When faced with the failures of His disciple, Jesus said in apparent exasperation, **“O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?”** Even the desperate father was less than confident about Jesus' ability. He began by calling on Jesus as, **“Teacher,”** as if Jesus were just another Jewish rabbi and not the Son of God. The father said, **“If You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.”** Jesus' exasperated reply: **“If you can! All things are possible for one who believes.”** Faith in Jesus is the issue. Jesus notes that faith in Him and His ability is at the center of this. The father's desperate cry to Jesus has stuck with me ever since I heard it. **“I believe! Help my unbelief!”**

I have felt like that father. I believe in Jesus – I have faith in God – but I did not see any proof that God could or wanted to help in me. Have you ever felt like that about God? Have you ever wondered what use it was believing in God because it didn't seem to do you any good? I hear the anguish in the father's reply to Jesus over his son's torments. He wanted to believe Jesus could help, but realized his faith was lacking. **“I believe! Help my unbelief!”**

There is some consolation in realizing that our troubles usually are not as bad as the boy or his father. Yet all Christians once were in the same basic situation as that son: with a spirit that made us mute and deaf, seized and thrown down. Really? Yes.

In the rite we use to baptize children and adults, we are reminded about who we started out as in this world and why we need God's saving work in baptism. "The Word of God also teaches that we are all conceived and born sinful and are under the power of the devil until Christ claims us as His own. We would be lost forever unless delivered from sin, death, and everlasting condemnation" (*LSB Agenda*, 6). We might not come to the font struck mute, foaming at the mouth or thrashing around endangering ourselves with fire and water, but we just as well could be.

This is made explicit in the alternate form of Holy Baptism offered in the *LSB Agenda* based on the rite Martin Luther adapted for use in the Church, which Lutherans used for almost 400 years. Following the statement, "The Word of God also teaches that we are all conceived and born sinful and are under the power of the devil until Christ claims us as His own," is the traditional exorcism, which Luther retained. "Therefore, depart you unclean spirit, and make room for the Holy Spirit" (*LSB Agenda*, 13). These words reflect what Mark says Jesus did in our Reading today. **"He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, 'You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.'"**

Why did the exorcism get removed from Lutheran baptismal rites over time? One reason was that rationalist philosophy infected church teaching and practice. Only things that can be proven and experienced are real; the existence of evil spirits was denied by Rationalists and rejected as a leftover relic of unenlightened superstition. Baptism, they taught, was nothing more than a quaint tradition of initiation into the Church and satisfied a legal requirement in the state churches of Europe to record a birth.

Another reason the exorcism was removed was because people rejected the biblical doctrine of original sin; they stopped believing that humans are conceived and born sinful and unclean; they rejected that Baptism is actually a washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. So baptism became unnecessary except as a sign of someone's prior decision and commitment to be a Christian. If people are born basically good, or at least neutral, they don't need an unclean spirit cast out of them at their baptism – they taught. These are signs of unbelief, a lack of faith in Jesus and His Word.

When Jesus commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the boy, something frightening happened: **After crying out and convulsing him terribly, [the spirit] came out, and the boy became like dead, so that most of them said, “He died.”** To them, it looked like Jesus had killed the boy while trying to save him. **But Jesus took him by the hand and raised him, and he arose.** The boy wasn't dead, but alive. You might have noticed that I modified slightly the text here. I did it to make it more literal. **“Like a corpse”** became **“like dead,”** and **“lifted him up”** became **“Jesus...raised him.”**

These are the very words the Gospels use to describe Jesus' death and resurrection. Right before today's account, as Jesus was coming down the Mount of Transfiguration with three of His apostles, St. Mark wrote: Jesus **charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead might mean.** At the end of the Gospel in the Easter account the angel at the empty tomb told the women who had come to embalm Jesus' dead body, **“Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen”** (16:6). What should we make of all this resurrection talk in this account of Jesus' exorcism of the unclean spirit, which made the boy look dead at first but then raised from the dead by Jesus?

Without baptism and without faith in Jesus we were like the boy with the evil spirit. We have deaf ears and mute tongues when it comes to faith and confessing faith in God. When baptized and brought to faith in Jesus, the evil, unclean spirit in us is driven out – exorcized – and Christians receive the Holy Spirit; we hear and believe God's Word and are given the ability to speak and confess our faith. St. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians three: **“No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit”** (12:3). And in Romans ten: **“The Word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’ (that is, the Word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved”** (10:8-10).

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Given the Holy Spirit and faith, we can cry out: **“O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare Your praise”** (Ps.51:15).

Like the boy from whom Jesus cast out the unclean spirit, we daily become like someone dead and then raised to life. Martin Luther reminds us of this in the Small Catechism on Baptism, Part four. *“What does such baptizing with water indicate? It indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”* This is Good Friday and Easter language, Jesus dying on the cross, buried, and raised from the dead.

Living in our baptism is a daily dying and rising with Christ. Because Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose from the dead, we are buried with Him through baptism into death, and because Christ was raised from the dead we are also raised from the dead daily by the forgiveness our sins and we will be raised from the dead on the Last Day in our glorious bodies never to die again (Rom. 6).

In the words of our Gospel: **After crying out and convulsing him terribly, [the spirit] came out, and the boy became like dead, so that most of them said, “He died.” But Jesus took him by the hand and raised him, and he arose.** That’s what Jesus does for us when we are baptized and brought to faith in Him.

...Which brings us back to what the father of the boy cried out to Jesus: **“I believe! Help my unbelief!”** Faith in Jesus is a struggle against our sin that demands proof of God’s existence, willingness and ability to help us in our time of need. Faith is a struggle against the devil who brings all sorts of trouble into our lives. Faith is a struggle against everything in this world that would seek to destroy and kill us. We realize that our ability to believe through all this is often at the breaking point, so we cry out with that father, **“I believe! Help my unbelief!”** And when it looks like we are dead, Jesus takes us by the hand and raises us up. Amen.