



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

“Faith on the Line”

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“... the father of the child cried out and said, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’” (Mark 9:24).

September 16, 2012

Collect of the Day

Lord Jesus Christ, our support and defense in every need, continue to preserve Your Church in safety, govern her by Your goodness, and bless her with Your peace; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

One day a man steps out of the crowd, and asks Jesus to help his son. The little boy has a major challenge. It looks a lot like epilepsy, but Jesus calls it demon possession and treats it that way too. It's a heartbreaking condition. Most of the time, he is fine; a beautiful, energetic little boy, always running, never walking, playing and talking and asking questions non-stop. And then, without warning, his face contorts, his eyes roll back, he falls down, and can't seem to speak or hear. He grinds his teeth and foams at the mouth. People are terrified and his friends run away; then, later, children, being children, tease him about it and mimic his seizures. It is humiliating. It's also dangerous; he is often injured by these attacks.

His parents have done everything they can think of because that's what you do when you have a sick child. They talked to everyone who knew anything . . . or thought they did. They went to the larger cities seeking more sophisticated help. They tried every prescription. Nothing has worked, and so they look to the future with a great deal of wariness and dread. The father of the boy knows he can protect his son from a lot of things, but he cannot protect him from this. And he knows they won't always be around to take care of him. So, they wait and watch for anyone who has a new idea, a new approach.

That's what the man was doing there that day. It doesn't say so, but I think he's feeling very vulnerable and not a little foolish. He doesn't like to beg anyone for help, and he's not at all comfortable with religious fanatics and faith healers and would-be messiahs. In fact, I suspect there's tension within him between his desperation to help his son, and his inherent skepticism of a rabbi who is said to

have healing powers. He doesn't like this business of coming to Jesus of Nazareth. But again, he's desperate.

"Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute and seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able."

And at that very moment, it happens again. The little boy has a seizure and falls down. And his father is surely on the ground now with him, cradling him, holding him tight, and with tears in his eyes he says, "If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us."

Jesus says, "If you can. . . All things are possible for one who believes." And now the man is openly weeping. He hadn't counted on that. Suddenly *his* faith is the center of attention; *his* faith is on the line. "All things are possible for one who believes" Jesus has said.

So there he is, holding his son, for whom he would be willing to walk through the fires of hell if only it would make his son well. But it turns out his son's life does not depend on his courage or his selfless sacrifice, but on his faith. And so, for the love of his son, he blurts out one of the most honest confessions I've ever heard. "I believe; help my unbelief!"

That touches my heart. I'm a dad. It touches that place in each of us where we love desperately enough to give life itself for the child, the spouse. But it's also the place where we know the limits of our love; where we know there are some things over which *we have no control*. We cannot give life-healing wholeness. We cannot even protect. And no amount of courage or self-sacrifice will make it any better. All we can do is love and care for the best we can and trust in God for the rest, and sometimes that is hardly satisfying. Sometimes we do that not because we're so strong in the faith or confident the Lord will intervene and heal, but because there's no where else to go with it. "I believe; help thou my unbelief!"

That's a confession for our age. We live in what is called the post-modern era where there are very few absolute

truths anymore. It's all relative, depending on your experiences and perceptions. In the post-modern era we are loathe to call any religion false; even the most fanatic fringe elements are thought of as valid and legitimate. In the post-modern era we don't like the word "doctrine" because it's too rigid and unbending. And here's where I'm going with this: in the post-modern world doubt is turned into a virtue. In our era, doubt is worn as a badge of honor. In our era, we think that because we have doubts about the Christian faith, that must mean we're modest people and appropriately humble.

"Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief." That's where many of us are because we are products of our time. Post-moderns often find themselves suspended somewhere between faith and unbelief, between certainty and doubt.

Doubt used to be a troublesome for the Christian, something that you didn't want to encourage or even tolerate, and certainly not anything you wanted parade around. But today, doubt has somehow become a mark of intellectual sophistication, even humility.

In our text, Jesus doesn't seem so keen on doubt and unbelief. "O faithless generation" he says, and one suspects he's not just talking about that generation 2,000 years ago. He's got our generation in his sights. "O faithless generation." Remember what he told Thomas. "Stop your doubting, and believe!" And to Peter, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Mt. 14:31). And to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" (Mk. 4:40). We live in a culture that thinks doubt is pretty cool, but we have a Savior who says, "Knock it off! Stop that!" Apparently he thinks it's dangerous. Would that we were pupils of Christ rather than products of culture!

Now, inquisitiveness and questioning are inevitable parts of the life of faith. And they are not necessarily unhealthy. In fact, faith grows when it is inquisitive. We should be inquisitive. But we must understand there are also forces inside and out that are warring against the faith. The devil, the world and our own sinful flesh would always have us in doubt and disbelief. In fact, that's the default setting of

the natural man. Part of the challenge then is to doubt out doubts. Part the challenge is to beat back the irrational deadweight of our old skeptical habits. Beat back the spirit of this age. Beat back the cares of the day lest these all steal away our faith. Part of the challenge is to give our fledgling faith a little breathing room. Protect that faith, as if it were a precious seed of fire that was struggling to take hold.

There are some who seem to reserve all their doubts for the Christian faith. That is they have no qualms about existence of Big Foot or the latest governmental conspiracy they found on the web, and they believe the Da Vinci Code is built on good, hard evidence and research . . . but the reality and historicity and grace of Jesus Christ is a hard one for them to accept. I dearly wish they would try doubting something else for a change. James writes, "He who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind" (1:6). It's so true.

Moreover, with our doubts the message we send is, "God, you are not trustworthy. You might be lying to us. In fact, we cannot stake anything on your Word, at least not with full confidence." In the garden, Adam and Eve took the serpent at his word, but God's Word they doubted. Could it be that we do the same?

Martin Luther compared the doubting heart to a foolish beggar holding out his hat for gifts. But instead of holding it still, he constantly moves it around. God would like to fill our hats and hearts with good things but cannot; we won't let him (W 52, 464). That's what unbelief does. It rejects the gifts of God.

"I believe. Help thou my unbelief." A few more things about doubts: Just because you have them does not mean you are no longer a Christian. Just because you have doubts does not make you a second rate, inferior Christian. Just because you have doubts does not mean God loves you less nor does it mean he will save you less if that were possible. Your doubts will not negate your baptism.

Now going at it from the other side: to have genuine faith does not mean you have everything sorted out and

resolved. It does not mean you have sure answers to all of life's tough questions. Having genuine faith does not mean you never get cranky in a church service or impatient at a church meeting. It means that, though you don't fully understand everything in Scripture, you believe God in Jesus Christ is good and gracious, and you're going to trust in him above everything. You're going to trust Him more than your own nagging doubts. You're going to trust him, the solid Rock, the firm foundation, more than your own feelings or experiences which are shifting sand.

Notice the Father in our text. He didn't have everything sorted out. He did not come with intellectual certainty. He wasn't ready to confess one of the three historic creeds. Rather, he confessed the most personal, honest creed. He brought to Jesus what he had: his faith, his unbelief and a heart full of love for his son, and you know, *it was enough. It was enough.* Jesus could work with it. Jesus gave this man what he most wanted and the boy what he most needed, in spite of fractured and confused and imperfect faith.

That means though you and I don't have all the answers, we can still trust God with our lives and with the lives of those we most love. We may not know what God has planned for us, but we can still trust him to do what is best for us according to his love and wisdom.

Remember Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They were Jewish princes who are about to be thrown into a fiery furnace for refusing to bow down before a golden image built by King Nebuchadnezzar. The three courageously refused to obey the King, so they've been given an ultimatum: bow or burn. Listen to what they say. "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden image that you have set up."

Did you hear it? Did you hear the honest uncertainty, the doubt? "But if not. . ." They weren't sure at all that God would intercede. They didn't know how it was going to

come out. Faith doesn't claim to know what God is planning. But faith takes the risk and walks into the future, even when it is a fiery furnace. Faith trusts that one way or another God will take care of things. He'll work it out, and it will be for our good and the good of others.

“All things are possible for one who believes” Jesus said. That's an invitation. That's an invitation to bring to him whatever faith you have and with whatever help you need, with your life, with your love for your dearest, maybe your desperate longing for their healing; it's an invitation to come with your hopes and fears about yourself, your relationships, your vocation, your aging, your death. Nothing is out of bounds. Bring whatever you have into his presence – your belief, your doubts, your unbelief. The promise is God is trustworthy – God is faithful. Whatever becomes of us, whatever the next chapter, God in the end can be counted on to love us and forgive us, accept us as his baptized children, and welcome us home. Amen.

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