

Proper 19 – The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost  
St. Mark 9:14-29

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Jesus had taken Peter, James, and John up to the top of a mountain. While they were there, the rest of the disciples were approached by a man whose son was possessed. So violent was this spirit, that it would throw down the man's son into convulsions, including foaming at the mouth, gnashing his teeth, and becoming rigid. Many times, this spirit caused the son to convulse into water or fire. Today, this mute spirit might be mistaken for epilepsy.

The man had hoped that Jesus' disciples would be able to exorcise his son. The disciples must have thought that they could, too. They had done the same before. Several chapters before today's text, Jesus had "appointed twelve...so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons." (Mark 3:14-15) A little while after that, Jesus sent them out to two-by-two into the surrounding towns and villages where they "proclaimed that people should repent. And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them." (Mark 6:12-13) "The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught." (Mark 6:30) Casting out demons was something that Jesus' disciples were used to doing, certainly something that they had done before; surely they would be able to cast out the demon from this man's son, or so they thought.

They were not able to. Now, you know how things often go when you try to do something and fail. There are those around who will point and laugh, mocking you in the process. There are your opponents who will use any failure as evidence against you in one cause or another, whether or not their point is valid. It's the kind of thing you see in political attack ad after political attack ad; one candidate's failures are given as proof that they should not be elected to the office they are running for, and his or her opponent responds in kind. It's the kind of thing you'll likely see and hear in the imminent presidential and vice presidential debates. And, it's exactly what the scribes and the nine disciples were doing when Jesus, Peter, James, and John came down from the mountain.

Jesus asked what was going on, though He certainly knew. The man came forward and answers Him curiously:

Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. And whenever it 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.

He says to Jesus, "I brought my son to you." Notice what he didn't say. "I knew these men who follow you have great power to cast out demons, so I brought my son to them." No, "I brought my son to you." It's almost as if the man sought Jesus through His disciples, confirming, at least in this man, what Jesus would later tell His disciples, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me" (John 13:20), words similar to what He must have told them when He sent them out two-by-two.

Still, the man's son is possessed. The nine disciples were unable to exorcise his son. The scribes thought the disciples utterly powerless, and this likely confirmed their bias against Jesus. And the disciples were confused, wondering why this time they could not cast out a demon when they had done it before, probably rebutting the scribes by proclaiming to them and the crowds, "We've done it before."

Jesus responded, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?"

There's a clue in that and the man's earlier response to Jesus to what is going on. The scribes and nine disciples, and most likely the crowds who came to watch the dispute, all thought the power to exorcise the demons rested in them. "O faithless generation," Jesus called them.

It's a clever trap set for humanity by the devil, the world, and your sinful nature. It started all the way back in Genesis when the crafty serpent asked Eve, "Did God really say...? You will not surely die. For

God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” (cf. Genes 3:1, 4-5) Eve took some of the fruit, ate it, and gave some to her silent husband and he, too, ate. Ever since then, man’s eyes have been closed to what is truly good and what is truly evil. Ever since then, man has thought himself to be like God; that he was the only one responsible for his gains and successes (yet, it is always someone else’s fault when he fails).

It’s what the scribes and Pharisees thought of their knowledge and religion, puffed up with a sense of superiority over the common man—“Look how learned and righteous I am”—even at times proclaiming as much before God in the synagogue, in a way that only seems grateful, even if only in parables: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.” (Luke 18:11-12) They probably wasted no time in asserting their superior knowledge into their dispute with the nine disciples as to why they failed to cast out the son’s demon and how to do it right.

It’s even what the nine disciples were dealing with. They most likely thought themselves experts in exorcising because they had done it before. They falsely believed the authority they had been given from Jesus to cast out demons to be some self-given power. (cf. Mark 3:15) They thought themselves like God, knowing good and evil, and having the power to cast out demons.

It’s a trap demonstrated in the book of Judges, which shows that a period of prosperity is followed by a time of apostasy as part of an ongoing cycle. The Israelites lived in God-given splendor and peace, and after a time, they believed they were the cause and source of the splendor and peace they enjoyed. They no longer recognized God as the giver of the peace and blessings they enjoyed. An oppressor rose up and over the Israelites, proclaiming to them the law of God in a very overbearing and often deadly manner. In time, the Israelites cried out in despair, and God would send a deliverer—a judge—to rid them of the oppressor. Then they would again live in a period of prosperity and peace. Lather, rinse, repeat...

I called it an ongoing cycle. This cycle continued well past the book of Judges; it continues even to this day. In the lives of many individual believers, prosperity often leads to some degree of apostasy which leads to oppression of some sort. People will have good times for which they begin to thank themselves, and the Law of God is proclaimed which knocks them down a notch. At times, this same cycle will manifest itself in a group of people, as could be deemed to have happened at the time of the Reformation with the church of the Papacy, the Lutheran reformers, and the ever encroaching Turks from the east.

Hearing of this cycle, you should be able to recognize it in yourself. From time to time, you get up on your high horse. You may even proclaim for all to hear, “I did this.” “I built this.” “I earned this.” ...or something similar. You start to trust in yourself for all that you need. You may even begin to trust in yourself for your salvation. Before you know it, you begin to sound like that Pharisee: “I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, etc.” The next thing you know, you are knocked off your horse by one little word—you fall to one little indiscretion, one simple mistake, one gross failure... one sin. It is inevitable, for all sin and fall short of the glory of God. (cf. Romans 3:23)

Your trust in yourself leads only to your doom. Trusting in yourself for your salvation and denying that your salvation is God’s work is sin. You simply cannot measure up to God’s glory; there is nothing you can do in order to be like God. Like the scribes and Pharisees and the nine disciples in today’s text, you have no self-gained power to avert your doom.

Jesus might as well have been speaking to you: “O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?” But, Jesus also says, “[A]ll things are possible for one who believes.”

“I believe; help my unbelief!” The man’s cry becomes your own cry for mercy when you are confronted with God’s Law. You see, the faith that you have is God-given—“I believe”—and it is constantly up against your Old Adam which seeks to draw you away from God and to trust only in yourself, so in faith you cry out for that mercy: “Help my unbelief!”

This faith has for its object Jesus Christ. And this only is saving faith, and none other, which faith has for its object the only true God and His Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, even as He once said to Nicodemus, "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God." (John 3:18)

You see, while you can never measure up to God's glory, Jesus Christ, the Son of God did, and He did it for you. The Word of God took on human flesh and was born of the virgin Mary to be your substitute. He perfectly kept the Law of God, fulfilling every part of it for you, and ultimately, He was the sacrifice for sin that the Law demanded—He was and is the once-for-all sacrifice for sin, the once-for-all deliverer from the oppressor that is sin, death, and the devil. Dear hearers, He has taken your sin from you and died on the cross with it—you died with Christ; now, it is no longer you who live but Jesus the Christ lives in you. The life you now live in the flesh you live by faith in the Son of God, who loves you and gave His life for you. (cf. Galatians 2:20) You live by faith in the Son of God—"I believe; help my unbelief!"

When you pray that, you are asking that you would die to yourself and live to Jesus Christ alone. You acknowledge that your faith is weak on account of your sinful nature, that you believe not as a result of any work you have done, that you can, therefore, do nothing to remain faithful or strengthen your faith, and that trust in yourself for anything is utter and deadly foolishness. It is a cry to God out of sheer helplessness, futility, humility, and emptiness. And, quite importantly, it is a *God-given plea* for His mercy and grace.

As a friend of mine once wrote:

When we realize that Jesus died not just for the worst parts of ourselves,  
but also the best parts of ourselves, we understand that the Christian Life  
is really just Word of God continually martyring Saint Me.

That is the Christian life—dying to yourself, martyring this puffed-up Saint Me, as it was put—and rising again daily to newness of life in Christ Jesus. By God's grace, you do not trust in yourself, but in God's Son, Jesus your Savior, because He has done everything you could not do to save you, and God gives it to you freely, without any worthiness or merit in you, solely out of His Fatherly, divine goodness and mercy.

"I believe; help my unbelief," the man cried out. Jesus, who is the man's Savior and his son's Savior, drove the spirit from the boy. No longer did this spirit seize him. The Kingdom of God had come to the boy. (cf. Matthew 12:28) You might like to think that Jesus said to the man and the boy what He had often said to people He healed: "Your faith has saved you." (cf. Mark 5:34; 10:52, at least in the Greek)

There is a beautiful passage in the Catechism of the Catholic Church which speaks to this:

The coming of God's kingdom means the defeat of Satan's...[Jesus' exorcisms] anticipate Jesus' great victory over "the ruler of this world."  
The kingdom of God will be definitively established through Christ's cross:  
"God reigned from the wood."

God has reigned from the wood. The Son of God shed His blood and died on the cross, his throne of grace, whence flows to you and to all His grace and mercy. God's kingdom has come to you and is come to you. You have been exorcised of sin and death and continue to be by the grace and mercy of God. He comes to you today in Word and Sacrament to drown again your Old Adam, drive from you the devil and all evil, and give to you anew faith to believe and trust in Him for your salvation—Jesus helps your unbelief! He has done for you what you could not do for yourself in order to save you, and gives you faith to believe it and trust in Him solely for your salvation. Therefore, your God-given faith has saved you; you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.