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Mark 9:14-29
Believing for Others
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Whenever Presbyterians run across a text that speaks of demons, we are tempted to overlook it. But as we read through Mark's gospel, it gets hard to keep avoiding the topic. In chapter one after Jesus called the disciples, the first thing they did was enter the synagogue and encounter a man with an unclean spirit. A few verses later we are told, "Jesus and the disciples went through Galilee proclaiming the message and casting out demons." In chapter three we read, "And Jesus appointed twelve apostles to be with him, to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons." Chapter five describes Jesus' healing of the Geresene demoniac - a man driven out of his mind by an unclean spirit. Chapter six depicts Jesus again sending out the twelve, and he again gives them authority over unclean spirits. In chapter seven Jesus casts the demon out of the daughter of the Syrophonecian woman.

Mark's point seems to be that if you stay with Jesus and are serious about following him as a disciple, you cannot escape this demon thing. That's because the places Jesus will take you are places in need of a Savior, places where someone is hurting because something evil has taken over.

Today we may not want to call it demonic. We may refer to it by more medically and psychologically sophisticated names today, but can we not all agree that something has gone wrong for too many people? Isn't it obvious that something has grabbed hold of their lives and it won't let go? Yes, and like the very first disciples, Jesus has called us to do something about it.

Mark begins chapter nine by telling us Jesus took Peter, James, and John up the Mount of Transfiguration. While they were away, the other disciples were asked to cast a demon out of a boy. When Jesus returned, he found his disciples arguing with the scribes because they weren't doing too well with this demon. Imagine what is going on inside these "other" disciples. Jesus was away on a spiritual retreat with his favorite disciples, the A team, which means they were already feeling like the second string. Then a father asks them to cast the demon out of his epileptic son, and they can't do it. So they argued. That's why we always argue - because we feel powerless.

While the argument continues, the father approaches Jesus and says, "Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit. Whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down: and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid, and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do it."

I know what that feels like. I know what it feels like to be told by Jesus to cast out evil and not be able to do it. According to *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators*, the number of teenagers getting pregnant has doubled in the last three decades, as has the suicide rate among teenagers, and so has the number of teenagers being arrested for violent crimes. We're now accustomed to hearing of shootings at inner city high schools and getting used to something like that is almost

evil in itself. But some of our kids in the suburban or private high schools could tell you about their own struggles with the demons of materialism that distracts them from real values, racism that just takes on more sophisticated but equally evil forms, alcoholism that cripples kids before they even start in life, and the deadliest problem of all which is heart breaking loneliness. Parents, who know that the world is hard on their kids and who are scared of what might happen, bring them to the church hoping that we can do something. We have a fabulous youth group, led by very talented people, but like the “other disciples” we cannot cast out the reasons to be afraid.

It isn't just our kids who are plagued by something mean and harsh. Last Sunday *The New York Times* ran an article on how desperate the economy is for Pittsburgh - as if that were a news flash. But I see it in the faces of parishioners who come to to talk to their pastor about their desperate search for a job. They just want a job. And their pleading eyes ask “Can't you do something?” But I cannot. Neither can I cast out cancer or fix bad marriages.

What about you? Don't you have a colleague, a neighbor, or a friend whose life seems to be unraveling, or a loved one whose health is slipping away? And don't you want to be of help, to make the evil go away for them? But you cannot.

That is the beginning of the good news! Thank God we are at the end of our rope. Now we are ready to behold the salvation Jesus alone can bring. You are never going to be of help to the Savior until you stop pretending to be the Savior. To the contrary as long as you are trying to be Jesus, you will just spend most of your time in arguments.

Jesus looked at his arguing disciples, just as he looks at the American churches that are all caught up in arguments that don't really matter, and he said, “Bring the boy to me.” That's our job, our calling, our mission. To bring the needs of the world to Jesus. On this Sunday when we are ordaining and installing our church leaders, let us be clear that God is not calling them to fix the church or the community around it. God is calling our leaders to bring us all to Jesus - the only hope for salvation we've got.

Continuing his story Mark tells us, “When the evil spirit saw Jesus, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about foaming at the mouth.” Notice that Jesus does not then rush to heal this boy. In fact, it looks to me like he is getting a medical history. He asks the father, “How long has this been happening?” Meanwhile the boy is convulsing on the ground. “Oh, from childhood? And you say it casts him into the fire? How about water? Oh, water too.” We want to break into this dialogue and exclaim, “Jesus what difference does that make? Fix it.” But Jesus never hurries. Bringing a hopeful future, especially to children, takes time.

This is one of the reasons why the church has so many traditions and why we teach our children to memorize our creeds and learn our liturgy. It is why we teach them the Bible and the Christian understanding of life. Because this is how we teach the next generation to turn from the evil. It doesn't matter if you have children in this church or not. Instilling a tradition of faith within the next generation is among our highest calling as a church.

We don't expect our kids always to love this tradition. They may think it is boring or dull.

They may not want to come to church, and when they are old enough, they may rebel from our faith. That's okay. Again, Jesus has taught us not to be in a hurry. The faith will be there, waiting, for them when they are ready to return to it. But I worry about those children who were never given the tradition of faith and who don't even have something worth rebelling against. For they are the ones who will be most susceptible to the evil spirits that will make them convulse with work and relationships trying to find the identity and love that they have already been given in Christ.

We cannot give faith to our kids, even those who grow up in the church, but we can at least insure that they believe we believe. The father of the boy said to Jesus, "I believe. Help my unbelief." Who among us cannot echo those words. "I have belief, though I must confess it is riddled with doubt and unbelief." According to this text, it is enough. It is enough to move Jesus who alone casts out evil.

After the boy was healed and the disciples were alone with Jesus, they asked him, "Why could we not cast the demon out?" Jesus responded, "This kind comes out only through prayer." If you are going to go after something evil in this world, and that is our mission, then you had better have your spiritual act together. You had better know how to pray. In your prayers, heaven and earth come together. In the words of Karl Barth, "To clasp hands together in prayer is the beginning of a great uprising against the disorder of the world." In prayer you bring the boy to Jesus. What were you planning on doing for him that was going to be more powerful than that? This is why we are also making such an emphasis in our church on learning how to pray. It isn't just for your own spirituality. It is because those around you are leaning on your belief.

Prayer can also take the form of mission. Volunteering in the homeless shelter, food pantry, or tutoring children at risk can be a prayer. Developing friendships with those who do not look like you and who live in a very different neighborhood can be a prayer. Listening to a colleague who is in trouble can turn into prayer because you believe that Jesus is listening to the conversation as well.

In a few weeks we will be inviting you sign up to sponsor a child in Malawi as part of our congregation's partnership with the church there. The few dollars a month you will spend on this child will provide education, medical relief, and hope for children - many of whom are AIDS orphans. And so placing their picture on your refrigerator can also be a prayer.

Prayer, be it in words or action, is a way of renewing our belief that Jesus is in our midst. He can cast out evil. That is what you need to believe. That is what the convulsing world needs you to believe. Amen.