

Listening for the Promise

WEEKLY DEVOTIONAL

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 12, 2021

“I believe, help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24)

When Jesus asked what the disciples and scribes were arguing about, the answer came from the father of a spirit-possessed child. “I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able,” he says. Jesus responds in frustration at the “faithless generation.”

We see unbelief in the father of the boy. He brought his child to the disciples with hope they could help, but they did not. Perhaps the father is thinking, “these disciples have met their match and could not do anything about this “kind” of spirit. If the disciples couldn’t cast out the spirit, then perhaps Jesus can’t either.” The father is struggling and cries out to Jesus, “If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” Jesus repeats the father’s words, almost mockingly, “If you can!” The father is uncertain of Jesus’ power because of the disciples’ failure. Regardless of how much God’s people may fail, God never fails.

Jesus is troubled by the persistent unbelief of the crowd, expressed by the simple words the boy’s father utters. After all the miracles Jesus has done, maybe there is a limit as to just how powerful Jesus is. Perhaps there is something that he cannot do. In verse 24 the father responds to Jesus by crying out, “I believe; help my unbelief.” This is a beautiful expression of faith, full of doubt and full of hope, and it should give those of us who want to follow Jesus much encouragement. It is an honest expression of the difficulty of faith. Perhaps you may have said the same thing and you are looking for “proof” that you have faith. Maybe, knowing you doubt at times, proves that you have faith. For who doubts what they don’t believe?

As this story concludes we find Jesus in a private conversation with his disciples. They ask, “Why could we not cast the spirit out?” The unbelief of the disciples is exposed. The disciples had failed in the same way the father had.

If this troubles you, take heart! Sometimes faith is not easy, even for the first disciples. But remember, God is pursuing you and wants to give you faith! Faith is not a human power but rather a divine power, the work of the Holy Spirit. God gives us faith through the Word, the Gospel, the sacraments, and the words of a preacher. Amen.

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