

Augusta First Baptist

February 25, 2007

Mark 9:14-29

Challenges of Faith: Dealing With Doubt

Lent 2007

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. Lent is a period of forty days ending on Easter. For about 1500 years, Christians around the world have observed Lent as a period of reflection and preparation for the celebration of Easter. It is a time to reflect on the sufferings and sacrifice of Jesus and consider how we, too, have been invited to take up the cross and follow Christ.

For this period of Lent, I am inviting you to join with me in a Biblical journey of the challenges of faith. Faith, you know, is a challenge. I suspect that many of us like challenges in life until we actually meet up with them.

Life is basically one challenge after another and faith, as part of our life, is by no means removed from those challenges. I am reminded of the Bollingers this past week. Last Sunday morning, Chris walks down the aisle and shares his profession of faith and that night the family loses everything in a house fire. This is a challenge of faith.

This morning I would like for us to consider as our first challenge of faith the subject of doubt. You may be thinking that doubt and faith are mutually exclusive and incompatible. When we doubt, does it not mean that we have no faith? The dictionary defines doubt as a feeling or state of uncertainty, especially as to whether something is true, likely, or genuine. What place, we may ask, does doubt have with faith?

Let's look more closely at today's gospel reading. For me this is one of the more tender stories in all of the gospels. While Matthew and Luke tell the same story, Mark provides some unique and poignant detail. This particular narrative is part of a larger section in the Mark's Gospel where the stories are concerned with preparing the followers for the challenges of following Jesus. It is not just what can God do for you and me, but what are we prepared to do for God. Mark sets the scene with Jesus, Peter, James and John returning from a literal mountaintop experience. When they meet up with the rest of the disciples, there is bedlam. A crowd has surrounded the disciples; there is arguing, accusations and counter-accusations. A desperate father is heard to say that his son is sick and the disciples could do nothing for him. (v.18)

Sometimes that happens right here with the church. Someone's marriage is failing, or a child has gotten into serious trouble, or somebody's finances are a mess and they turn to the church and say "fix it." And when the problem is not fixed or does not go away, it is not uncommon to encounter bitterness and disillusionment.

This father is desperate, disheartened and hurt. Notice that four times in this simple story a "crowd" is mentioned. The scene is one of confusion and the picture is of lives that have become unmanageable and spiraling evermore out of control.

Surely you and I have been in such a crowd where commotion and pandemonium rule in place of what is orderly and sane.

Jesus listens to the desperate pleas of the father and asks him a question or two about the boy. The father, jaded by the disappointment in the disciples ends his request by imploring, "if you are able..." (v.22).

We can hear this father's exasperation when he asks of the holy one called Jesus, "*If you are able...*" It is the sound of a parent frustrated by disappointment in doctors and preachers. It is the sigh of one who has

turned in every direction possible only to be discouraged again and again. Who can blame him for looking Jesus in the eye and say, “*If you are able?*”

Even Jesus is taken aback. “*If I am able?*” It had to be an incredulous tone. You see, for Jesus, disbelief has littered the scene. The scribes refuse to believe, the disciples try to believe but can’t, and the father has had too much disappointment to invest all his hope in Jesus.

Jesus abruptly responds with an unmistakable tone of indignation: “*If you are able – all things can be done for the one who believes.*” (v. 23)

It is at this point in the story, that I suppose for every reader, our hearts are heavy. All things can be done for the one who believes. The problem is, we are not so confident about our beliefs. I contend we all journey through the shadowed valley of doubt at one point or another.

Consider these words of Job: *But when I looked for good, evil came; and when I waited for light, darkness came. [27] The churning inside me never stops...* (Job 30:26-27)

Here Mark gives us a window of faith that we would rather not look through – the window of doubt: “***I believe; help my unbelief!***” (24b).

Doubt seems to be so opposite of faith does it not? It can be defined as mistrust, disbelieving or skeptical. Theologically, we can add to the definition, faithless and unbelief. If you doubt, we say, you don’t believe. Yet, I think the doubt and belief are more compatible than we may be comfortable admitting. I need to be upfront and remind us all, that Jesus himself chastised his disciples when they showed evidence of doubt. Remember the wild storm that threatened to capsize their boat? Later on, Matthew records him as saying, “*If you do not doubt, you can move mountains.*” And after he had resurrected from the dead, he spoke directly to Thomas about his doubt.

I am not trying to contradict Jesus in saying doubt and faith is the same thing or in some way equal. But I would like to suggest that doubt as one author phrases it, “is the growing edge of faith.” Doubt is one of the foot paths to faith. The trouble is that most of us want an easier pathway than doubt. We want the spiritual promotion of faith without rolling up our pants legs and wading through the slop of doubt. In fact, to be faithless is to not be true to the duty or obligation one has; to be disloyal and traitorous. Doubt has nothing to do with being untrue. It is just an echo of the one who faced Jesus and said, “*I believe; help my unbelief.*” “Lord, I am trying and I want to believe, but everything else is getting in the way.”

Church is to be the last place we shield people from the pain of facing difficult situations and raising tough questions. Kirby Godsey wrote a book about ten years ago entitled *When We Talk About God...Let’s Be Honest*. Ironically, shortly after the book was published there was a small uproar. Apparently, many could not handle the current President of Mercer University speaking honestly about his faith. In his book he wrote: “*Disciples are learners. The church is a community of believers who accept each other regardless of different ideas and different life histories. Walking together through the shadows of doubt and the valleys of grief is the church’s best hope for developing a faith that has the power to sustain.*” (*When We Talk About God...Let’s Be Honest*)

I believe, help my unbelief is the cry for a second miracle. Heal not only my child, but heal my faith. It is not that the father’s unbelief is commendable. I am not suggesting we go forth from here with a sort of self-proclaimed and heroic doubt. The father in the story is tired of pretending and so in this simple phrase he is expressing two things: (1) confessing his lack of faith and, (2) expressing a desire to grow.

Faith is daring to arm wrestle with evil, to stand in the face of disappointments and doubt and survive. One has faith because of questions and in spite of questions. The next time you feel like God can't use you, just remember...

Noah was a drunk. Abraham was too old. Isaac was a daydreamer. Jacob was a liar. Leah was ugly. Joseph was abused. Moses had a stuttering problem. Gideon was afraid. Samson was a womanizer. Rahab was a prostitute. Jeremiah and Timothy were too young. David had an affair and was a murderer. Elijah was suicidal. Isaiah preached naked. Jonah ran from God. Naomi was a widow. Job went bankrupt. John the Baptist ate bugs. Peter denied Christ. The Disciples fell asleep while praying. Martha worried about everything. Mary Magdalene was, well, you know... The Samaritan Woman was divorced...more than once! Zaccheus was too small. Paul was too religious. Timothy had an ulcer. And.... Lazarus was DEAD!

No more excuses now. God's waiting to use your full potential.

Faith is birthed out of the great questions of “why me?” “Why does God seem so distant? Does God even care?” *I believe, Lord it's my unbelief that I am having a hard time with!* Faith is not so much begging God and having God change the outside circumstances. It is about trusting God for the strength to be seen through the valley of the shadow of doubt. “Faith,” to quote Godsey again, “Is not an armor to protect. It is more like a sword with which to do battle.” (p. 23)

What, then, are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. [38] For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, [39] nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:31, 37-39)

This is a story about faithlessness and doubt. But ultimately it is about surviving beyond doubt into the courage to believe.

Someone once asked a minister I worked with: “Where is God when it hurts?” to which he replied, “He is in you, the one hurting, not in it, the thing that hurts.”

The season of Lent is about trudging through the sufferings of Jesus – and ultimately the cross – to recognize a God who hurts in us and with us. No one is exempt from disappointment or tragedy, not even God. And that somewhere beyond the cross is a tomb that is empty and a faith that is whole.

If you feel you have been “sermonically” cheated by not getting a few “points” out of this message, then jot these down:

1. It takes courage to confess doubt, that is lack of faith. I am not so much concerned about the doubters and skeptics around me. It is those who feel smug with the self-assurances that they have all the answers that worry me.
2. Honestly face your genuine questions and difficult circumstances. This is the beginning of growth. The father in the story confessed both unbelief and belief – doubt and the desire to grow.
3. Church is where we come with doubts and disappointments to find hope – faith. We are the community of sinners, doubters, and broken, who are welcomed into the arms of the only One who can do anything about it. His name is Jesus, which means “God saves.”
4. Doubt is not a destination. Doubt is not a parking space. When the disciples approach Jesus privately and asked what they could have done, Jesus responded and said, “Pray.” That is, enter into community with God. Prayer is not asking with the answer in mind. Our goal is to live beyond doubt and into belief.

The language of Easter is to take our doubts, our failures, our disappointments and angers and bring them to Jesus. God is ready to bless you. You don't even have to fully believe it. You only have to, as John Killenger writes, want to believe it, and God who is ready to heal the likes of you and me of all our demons and doubts, will do it. Does this sound unbelievable? That may be the point.

"You know, sometimes it is the artist's task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left." (Itzhak Perlman)