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Mark 9:14-29
February 18, 2024

If You Can?

How about that Super Bowl? That was something else! I have to admit that even though I had no skin in the game, I was rooting for the 49rs. If only because of their quarterback, Brock Purdy. I love his story.

In 2022, Brock Purdy was selected by the 49rs as the last pick of the NFL draft. The last pick always comes with the dishonorable title of “Mr. Irrelevant.” The dictionary describes irrelevant as “not relating or pertinent to the matter at hand; not important.” In other words, Brock Purdy, though selected by the 49rs was written off as nobody important. He was never expected to be a starting player on a championship caliber football team.

That is until certain injuries to the 49rs first and second string quarterbacks propelled Purdy into the limelight to see what he could do. Now this 24 year old last pick draftee from Iowa State has two NFC championships under his belt and an impressive Super Bowl appearance. Hardly irrelevant, I would say.

By the way, what were the names of the two quarterbacks he replaced?

Yeah, I don't remember them either. Irrelevant!

But despite the label he received, Brock Purdy had to practice hard, every day, whether or not he ever made it into a game. He had to have faith that one day he'd get that opportunity to show the world what he was made of.

He had to believe that he had what it took to play in a championship game. Apparently he does.

We all love a great comeback story.

In today's scripture story we see another comeback story of a desperate father who brought his demon possessed son to Jesus for healing. Jesus' disciples couldn't cast it out, so he came to Jesus himself.

To frame this story, Jesus had just returned with his three besties, Peter, James, and John, from a hike up a mountainside where they spent three days together. It was then that they witnessed Jesus be transfigured before them into his glorious splendor and they heard Elijah and Moses speak with Jesus. It must have been quite a sight to see. But when they returned to the other disciples, they were in muck about the fact that they were unable to heal this man's son. They were arguing with the teachers of the law.

Please join me as we read Mark 9:14-29.

14 When Jesus and those who were with him came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them. The teachers of the law were arguing with them.

15 When all the people saw Jesus, they were filled with wonder. And they ran to greet him.

16 “What are you arguing with them about?” Jesus asked.

17 A man in the crowd answered. “Teacher,” he said, “I brought you my son. He is controlled by an evil spirit. Because of this, my son can’t speak anymore.

18 When the spirit takes hold of him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth. He grinds his teeth. And his body becomes stiff. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit. But they couldn’t do it.”

19 “You unbelieving people!” Jesus replied. “How long do I have to stay with you? How long do I have to put up with you? Bring the boy to me.”

20 So they brought him. As soon as the spirit saw Jesus, it threw the boy into a fit. He fell to the ground. He rolled around and foamed at the mouth.

21 Jesus asked the boy’s father, “How long has he been like this?”

“Since he was a child,” he answered. **22** “The spirit has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us. Please help us.”

23 “‘If you can?’” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for the one who believes.”

24 Right away the boy’s father cried out, “I do believe! Help me overcome my unbelief!”

25 Jesus saw that a crowd was running over to see what was happening. Then he ordered the evil spirit to leave the boy. “You spirit that makes him unable to hear and speak!” he said. “I command you, come out of him. Never enter him again.”

26 The spirit screamed. It shook the boy wildly. Then it came out of him. The boy looked so lifeless that many people said, “He’s dead.” **27** But Jesus took him by the hand. He lifted the boy to his feet, and the boy stood up.

28 Jesus went indoors. Then his disciples asked him in private, “Why couldn’t we drive out the evil spirit?”

29 He replied, “This kind can come out only by prayer.”

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

Writer Ralph Smith once made an observation that children ask roughly 125 questions per day and adults ask about six questions per day. So somewhere between childhood and adulthood, we lose 119 questions per day. A child's innate curiosity about life is instilled in them at birth by the One who longs to be discovered. The more questions they ask, the more they discover about the world

around them. The more they discover about the world around them, the more they discover about the One who made them.

Unless we become like little children, asking more questions than we have answers, then we will never inherit the kingdom of God.

In our scripture story today, Jesus asked not just one but two questions. Apparently the disciples had not yet picked up on Jesus' question asking nature. Questions that get them to look deep within themselves for the answers. Questions that Jesus wasn't going to provide the answers to himself.

There are a couple of things that strike me this morning in this story. What was the first question that Jesus asked? Why couldn't the disciples drive out this spirit and how it points to our human limitations today? We will see how Jesus again invited someone into a healing partnership with God. And finally we will dive into the question of if everything is possible for God, then why doesn't God answer our prayers whenever we ask for something?

Jesus asked two questions in our story today. The first one was directed to the other disciples who were left behind from his little soiree with Peter, James, and John at the Mount of Transfiguration. "What are you arguing with them about?" They were arguing with the teachers of the law. So who were the teachers of the law? The Greek describes them as the scribes, or people who understood God's Laws and how to teach them to the people.

These were the same people that Matthew mentioned who gathered around King Herod at Jesus' birth. They were Jewish scholars who were professionally trained in the development, teaching, and application of the Old Testament law. Their authority was strictly human and traditional. They too were members of the Sanhedrin which would eventually accuse and convict Jesus of heresy worthy of death.

These people were rule followers. Answer men, not questioners.

When the disciples couldn't apply Jesus' "methods of healing" to this man's son, the teachers of the law thought that they would give it a try. By telling this father all the things they should do according to the Old Testament law.

Does anyone remember a guy in the 1980-90's by the name of Hank Hanegraaff, The Bible Answer Man. He was a famous radio talk show host and apologist who would debate Christianity with people who would call in. In other words, he would tell them exactly what the bible said about correct Christian doctrine. Hanegraaff called people heretics if they did not agree with his interpretation of the Word of God.

Interestingly in later years, Hanegraaff became increasingly discontent with American Protestant Evangelicalism and converted to the Eastern Orthodox Church, which embraces the mystery of our Christian faith. Mysteries to which there are no biblical answers.

Christian Author Max DePree wrote, “We do not grow by knowing all of the answers, but rather by living with the questions.”¹

Interesting.

Jesus was forty times more likely to ask a question to get people to think for themselves than to flat out tell them the answer. We want answers. That’s the easy way. Chris, just tell us what we need to know and we’ll do that. We don’t want to think for ourselves. That is the hard way. But my friends, thinking for ourselves is the more life changing way.

The disciples were arguing with the Bible answer men of their day. And it wasn’t getting them anywhere.

One reason I try to bring the Greek and Hebrew understanding into my sermons occasionally is not to impress you with my language skills. But to get us to approach God’s Word with a sense of humility. There is so much behind the Words, cultural context, and such that we just don’t understand. That’s why we must trust the power of the Holy Spirit to illuminate our hearts and minds so that we can better understand what God is saying to us.

This begs the question, why couldn’t the disciples drive out this demon as Jesus could and what are our human limits today?

Notice that it wasn’t until the disciples humbly came to Jesus with a solemn question did they get a direct answer in return.

“Why couldn’t we drive out this evil spirit from the boy,” they asked?

Jesus replied, “This kind can only come out by prayer.”

You see apparently there are limits to where our practices can only take us so far. As a faith practitioner myself, I want to use all that I’ve been professionally trained in to help people in matters of faith. I want to be able to problem solve problems with them and tell people exactly what they should do to fix their lives.

But I can’t. Because my tricks can only go so far. Not everything is possible within my ability, strength, or power. I can’t.

But Jesus can.

That’s why Jesus told them that this sort of situation can only be dealt with by prayer. When we finally realize that we’ve come to end of ourselves, then we trust that God’s ability, strength, and power goes the rest of the way to accomplish exactly what God intends.

This is hard for those of us who spend a lot of time, money, and energy being professionally trained to do something. This goes to our medical professionals as well. Probably the most important realization that every medical professional must have is that they are “practitioners.” They “practice” certain medical tricks of the trade with us. Some things work for some people. Other things work for other

¹ Max DePree, Leadership Is an Art, Leadership, Vol. 15, no. 3.

people. But you won't know exactly what is needed unless they practice their medicine on us.

Now I am grateful for modern medicine. The condition that this boy had sounds a lot like epilepsy, which we know is a treatable condition. Back then, it was considered a spiritual possession. Who can blame them? It's a scary event. As a parent, I can only imagine how helpless one must feel when their child has an epileptic seizure.

According to the Center for Disease Control if a person is having a seizure, we are to remain calm, have other people step away to provide space. Gently ease the person the floor and put something soft under their head like a pillow or jacket. Loosen any tight clothing like a neck tie to help them breathe freely. Stay with the person until the seizure is over and help them sit up when they are able and tell them what happened.

Do not try to hold them down. Do not put something in the mouths so they don't bite their tongues. Do not try CPR. People will start breathing on their own. Do not give them something to eat or drink until they are fully awake.

Do call 911 if the seizure lasts longer than five minutes.

I share this because we all need to be aware of what we should do in the event of a medical emergency here. Probably the most important thing that we can do to help while those who are attending to the situation is to stay clear and pray. Pray for the person. Pray for the family members. Pray for the Emergency First Responders.

Remember when we reach the end of our ability to help, we must trust that God will step in to provide what is needed in that moment. But we are not Jesus. We are not God. Neither are the medical professionals or first responders who care for us.

The next thing I want to address in the story is how Jesus invited this parent into a healing partnership. Just like we heard from last week's sermon in last and how Jesus healed a man who had been invalid for thirty eight year, Jesus expected this father to have some skin in the game. Some faith skin.

The father asked Jesus, "If you can do anything, have pity on us and help us."

Jesus replied, "If you can?" Everything is possible for those who believe."

The skin that Jesus expected this man to offer was faith. A belief that anything was possible for Jesus. Remember just before this story, Jesus had cast out a demon from a Syrophenician woman's daughter, restored the hearing and speech of deaf mute man, fed four thousand people from seven loaves of bread and a few fish, and healed a blindman at Bethsaida. Certainly this man heard these stories which is why he brought his son to Jesus in the first place. He must have had at least a little faith to have done that.

There are many other examples in scripture where people come to Jesus for healing and he said to them, “Go your faith has made you well.” There is that healing partnership. We do our part by faith. And Jesus does his part as the Son of God.

How might Jesus be inviting us into a healing partnership of faith? Are we joining Jesus in prayer? Are we turning over as many stones as we can? Are we doing what is within our capability? And then are we trusting God with the results? If not, then maybe Jesus is inviting us to believe that “Everything is possible for those who believe.”

But then if everything is possible for God, what do we do when God doesn't answer our prayers when we ask for something?

We believe that God can. But what if God doesn't.

First we realize that God is God, we are not.

And then we look to the hall of faithful in the Book of Hebrews. Men and women who received a particular promise from God, but then God had something else in store.

The author of the Book of Hebrews wrote, “Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. That is what the ancients were commended for.”²

So we see how Abel had faith and trusted God by giving sacrificially of his first fruits, a better offering than his brother. But then Cain got jealous and murdered his brother. And so Abel missed out on the blessing that was promised to him.

Enoch had faith and was commended as one who pleased God. But then God took him from this life before he tasted death. And so Enoch missed out on the blessing of seeing his offspring flourish under him.

Noah had faith, believed God about the coming flood, and built an ark that saved his family. But then Noah's sons didn't follow in his footsteps in walking with God. And so Noah missed out on the blessing of watching his sons live in relationship with God.

Abraham had faith and obeyed God time and time again. But when he and his wife became impatient with God's plan for their offspring, they chose to conceive a son, Ishamel, through Sarai's handmaiden, Hagar. But when Abraham and Sarai finally had a son of their own, Isaac, enmity sprung up between Isaac and Ishmael, and there has been bitter hatred between the two families ever since.

Isaac had faith and blessed his sons, Jacob and Esau, on his deathbed. But when it came to pass on those blessings, Isaac broke with tradition and blessed the younger son first, Jacob, and not the older, Esau.

² Hebrews 11:1

And so on. And so on. Do we see a pattern developing here?

The author of Hebrews said, “These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”³

In other words, we might be faithful and believe God promised us one thing, but God in God’s sovereignty may deliver another.

This has me thinking about our conversations about Israel and Palestine.

What if our desire to see peace in the Middle East comes with the same unsure faith in our scripture story today? It’s like we pray, “If you can bring peace, take pity on us and help.”

And Jesus says, “If You Can? Everything is possible for those who believe.”

To which we respond, “We do believe; help us overcome our unbelief.”

Clearly Israel has not achieved the kind of peace that we had hoped for once they secured a homeland. What if God has something better in store so that only together, all people, Jews, Arab, Christian and others, might finally live in peace?

Could we let go of the former promises of God and instead embrace something new that God might have in store?

I don’t know the answer, but it’s an interesting question to consider.

So may we consider what healing partnerships Jesus might be inviting us into today. May we bring what little faith we have, trusting that as we do our part, Jesus will do his. And may we believe that everything is possible for those who believe, though it might be different than as we asked. Amen.

³ Hebrews 11:39