

Epworth Chapel on the Green
September 13, 2009
Pentecost 15
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 50:4-9
Psalm 116
James 2:1-18
Mark 9:14-29

The story in our Gospel lesson today is one of my favorite stories in the New Testament. I like it because I identify with this man who has brought his son to Jesus, and I see a lot of *him* in me.

Like many figures we meet in the New Testament, we don't know very much about this man. Mark is not interested in his biography. We do, however, know a little about the world in which he lived. It was a world of competing ideologies. A world divided by cults, mystery religions, and esoteric religious philosophies. His was a crazy, mixed up world where it was hard to believe in *anything* with certainty.

Does that look like anything you know?

From this kind of a world this man brings his son to Jesus. In a world where it's hard to believe in anything, this man is certainly no paragon of faith. He does not know if Jesus *can* or *will* do anything for his son. He is merely a desperate father, who for years has shared and endured the pain and torment of his son. When he says to Jesus, "if you can, take pity on us and help us," we notice that the

language is plural, and we understand that, for the suffering here in this case is not merely the child's problem.

Jesus responds by saying: "if you can? All things are possible to him who believes."

To which this broken, desperate, hurting man says: "I do believe; help my unbelief."

That is to say, "I believe -- *somewhat*. Help me to believe more fully."

This story resonates so strongly with me, I guess, because I see a lot of myself in this man. Perhaps you see some of yourself in this man also.

For we also live in a world of competing ideologies and perspectives. Sociologists speak to us about what they call the "social construction" of reality, where we form our beliefs largely on the basis of what the majority of society is doing.

We live in a world where we have seen during the last few years a great erosion of certainty. It's hard to believe in anything, especially Jesus. In such circumstances, our faith can at times be a partial faith. We may find ourselves in situations where our prayer is very much like this man who brought his son to Jesus. We're not entirely sure that Jesus can or will do anything to help us in our particular need. We say, "Lord, I believe -- partially. I want to believe. Please help my unbelief. Please help the part of me that is struggling."

I think the most important reason I love this story is because this prayer -- the prayer which says, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief" -- is a prayer that God *always* answers.

This man was broken, hurting, confused, and desperate. He wasn't sure what he knew or believed. But in his pain he reached out to Jesus and offered to Jesus what he had in that moment -- a tiny, partial faith.

I'm so glad that Jesus did not say on another occasion, "if you have faith the size of a mountain, you can move this mustard seed." He said, "if you have faith the size of a grain of mustard, you can move a mountain." The difference is important.

I sometimes think that this man who comes to Jesus doesn't offer Jesus his faith as much as he offers his desire to have faith. As if he says to Jesus, "Lord, I'm not sure I believe, but I *want* to!"

But the point is that he reaches out to Jesus from where he's at, and Jesus answers his prayer. His partial faith was enough to connect him to the grace of God that is beyond our understanding. Jesus heals his son, and suddenly there is something this man can now believe with certainty.

Have you ever seen Michelangelo's famous painting entitled, "Creation of Adam?" The painting depicts the hand of God reaching down from heaven, extended out toward the hand of Adam, the two fingers almost touching.

That rings true to our experience, I believe. It reflects how we truly live in the world. In our moments of confusion, despair, anger and pain, we reach out to God. We reach out in our pain and our desperation. When we're not sure if we can believe anything with certainty, we reach our hands up like little children. When we do, we find that God's hand is already there, waiting to complete the connection.

When our faith is weak, partial, and shaky, Jesus reaches out to us. When the circumstances of our lives push us toward despair and hopelessness, God bends down to us in our need, fills our hearts, and shines light into the dark places of our lives.

As we prepare to come to the Lord's table this morning, it may be that you find yourself at a similar place in life as this man who brought his tormented son to Jesus. You may have experienced that great erosion of certainty in your life. You feel alone, and you're not sure how to ask for help, or *who* to ask for help.

As you come to the table, remember this man who came to Jesus. Jesus touched him in his *half-belief*, in his yearning for something more than his intellect alone could comprehend. So bring who you are and what you have to Jesus today. And the God who loves you more than you have ever understood love in your life will complete the connection. See these tangible signs of bread and wine as God's hand, reaching down from heaven to you, to bring you peace.

Come today, as this man did long ago, saying: “Lord, I want to believe; help my unbelief.” You won’t be disappointed. For this is a prayer that God *always* answers.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.