

Help My Unbelief

This is another one of those passages that most preachers with a lick of sense avoid. As I was considering what to preach on this morning, I noticed that the Revised Common Lectionary had this passage listed as an alternate Gospel reading in the Anglican Communion and, since I'd never used it, I thought I'd give it a shot. Interestingly, however, when I mentioned this to my Episcopalian lectionary study-buddy, he looked at me like I was from Mars. He'd never seen any such listing. And, as I said, there are plenty of reasons for omitting this pericope. It's given rise to some truly dreadful theology, the kind that damages people's spirits and drives them away from the Church. But there are also lessons of real beauty and importance here, so I'm going to try to do something positive and creative with this reading this morning and I'll let you all tell me later if I've succeeded at all.

Let's start with what this passage is not. The bad theology that I mentioned has come from this passage is centered in what I believe to be a misunderstanding of the story. It goes like this: the man brought his son to the disciples to be cured and they couldn't do it because they didn't pray enough. They didn't know how to pray the same way Jesus did, so God wouldn't answer their prayers. And the man didn't show enough faith in them or even in Jesus for his son to be cured. Jesus just cured him anyway because he was so merciful. Has anybody here heard one of those ideas connected with this passage?

That interpretation leads to a dreadful corollary: faith shaming. It's the churchy version of body shaming (you're too fat, too thin, too tall, too short for somebody to find you attractive) or slut shaming (the way you dress, you had it coming to you) and the like. It sounds like this: You can't get well or your child, spouse, friend, loved one died because you don't have enough faith. Has anybody here every heard that asinine piece of "wisdom?" It makes me furious and I promise you'll never hear it from me, at least.

I got to hear it myself a couple of weeks ago, albeit in slightly disguised form. I was at a pastors' breakfast that I've mentioned before. We get together once a quarter and we are, as the old song says, "red, brown, yellow, black, and white." It's a great group for a lot of reasons. At our last meeting, I was taking my morning medications and a couple of the guys who've known me longest started ribbing me good-naturedly about the number of pills I was taking. Laughing, I said, "Hey, whaddya want from me? I'm diabetic, I've had one heart attack already, and I've got arthritis." Immediately, one of the white pastors who was new to the group said, "We can pray those demons right out of you, brother! I've prayed the demon of diabetes out of two people before. Let's pray right now!" And he grabbed my hand and proceeded to pray for me.

Now, on the one hand, I was grateful for this brother's faith and his desire to help me. On the other hand, he made me pretty uneasy. So, did he think I'd never prayed to have these particular thorns in the flesh removed, like Paul? Was he saying, tacitly, that his faith was stronger than mine? The answer to that question was no, of course. I can't imagine that he was trying to shame me. But the way it felt to me was different. It felt to me like faith shaming and I didn't like it. But I appreciated his heart in the matter and I thanked him and I doubt that I'll ever let him know that I felt differently.

That good-hearted brother's reaction to my ailments reminds me of Jesus' disciples and their actions in this passage. They mean well but... I think one of the lessons in this story is an

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admonition against “magical thinking,” the kind of thought process that says if we just say the right words, make the right gestures, have the right kind of ideas and beliefs and faith, hold our mouths just right, then we can make anything happen. It’s the positive corollary of “if only you had enough faith, God would do this for you.” It’s important to note that when Jesus, Peter, James, and John come down from the mountain, they find the rest of the disciples arguing with a group of scribes, who then promptly disappear from the story. What are they arguing about? Many scholars think they were arguing about the proper forms of exorcism. Jesus’ disciples had not been able, after all, to drive the evil spirit from the boy as his father had requested and so the scribes were on hand to tell them what they had done wrong. Exorcism, you see, was quite common in first-century Palestine and the techniques were based on some writings attributed to Solomon, the wisest man that had ever been.

So in the understanding of both the scribes and Jesus’ disciples, the fault was in their technique. The disciples must have thought that they’d forgotten some formula. They had every reason to be confident in their power to help this boy, after all. Jesus himself had granted them power to heal and they had done so previously. Mark 3:15 tells us that when Jesus appointed the Twelve as apostles, he gave them “authority to cast out demons.” This giving of authority is repeated in Mark 6:7 and Mark 6:13 says, “They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.”

“The problem” as my old New Testament professor Alan Culpepper puts it in his commentary on Mark, “was that the disciples had presumed that they had the power to exorcise the spirit because they had exorcised other spirits. If this is the case, then their faithlessness lies in their presumption or their trust in their own ability rather than turning to God for the power to help the boy.” Culpepper continues, “(Jesus) teaches the disciples that they are not to presume on past successes but to seek God’s help in every situation.” Or, as the British scholar C.E.B. Cranfield writes, “They had to learn that God’s power is not given to men in that way. It has rather ever to be asked for afresh (“in prayer”) and received afresh. To trust in God’s power in the sense that we imagine that we have it in our control and at our disposal is tantamount to unbelief; for it is really to trust in ourselves instead of in God.”

Another way to express this is that the disciples’ fault lies in their “magical thinking.” God becomes reduced to Fairy Godmother status, or comparable to the genie in Aladdin’s lamp, at our beck and call, as long as we rub the right lamp, to respond to our every wish. God becomes like a vending machine – just put in the right amount of change and push the right button. One of my favorite rock albums shows a deep reaction against this sort of approach to God. On Jethro Tull’s “Aqualung” album, writer and lead singer/flutist Ian Anderson tells of his teenaged rebellion against the Church of England that was in charge of his education, both secular and sacred. In an imagined encounter with the God he was taught about as a boy, Anderson sings, “So I asked this God a question and by way of firm reply, He said -- I’m not the kind you have to wind up on Sundays.”

In contrast to the presumption of the disciples, we get a very real picture of spiritual humility in the father of the afflicted boy. It is not hard for most of us to imagine the emotional roller-coaster this poor fellow has been on. Told of a miracle-worker who can seemingly heal the most intransigent illnesses, cast out the most ferocious demons, he must have felt a surge of hope for

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his tormented son. Hearing word that the healer and his disciples were nearby, he must have hurried with his son to the place they were, only to find that the miracle-worker was absent, derailing his hopes. But perhaps his disciples... “Oh, yes,” he was assured, “they could handle this.” And, of course, they couldn’t. Up and down, up and down his emotions must have gone. Is it any wonder, then, that when Jesus came on the scene the man said, in response to the rabbi’s questions, “if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.” And when Jesus echoed him, “If you are able! —All things can be done for the one who believes,” the nameless father must have thought he’d blown it. His son wouldn’t be cured and he was to blame because he hadn’t shown the proper deference to the healer. His cry is one of despair. “I believe; help my unbelief!”

The father of the boy with what we would call epilepsy stands as a vivid contrast to the disciples. They are cocky; he is uncertain. It is his humility in the presence of Jesus that gets the job done, not the spiritual pride of the disciples or the scribes. Bryan Findlayson writes, “It may seem that little faith, in the terms of ‘help my unbelief,’ is responsible for unanswered prayer, yet faith as small as a mustard seed moves mountains. Perfect faith, doubt-free faith, lies in the province of God’s perfection and is certainly not within the reach of we mere mortals.” The compassion that Jesus shows to this man and his son, the compassion that God shows for us every moment of every day, is not contingent upon our status as giants of faith. All we need is a willingness to be open to God, even if we’re not sure what that means.

It’s a good reminder to us that faith in Christ is not about assenting to a set of intellectual principles. In her recent book, Learning to Walk in the Dark, Barbara Brown Taylor reminds the reader of the history of the English word, “belief.” “In the sixteenth century,” she writes, “‘to believe’ meant ‘to set the heart upon,’ or ‘to give the heart to...’ By the nineteenth century, when knowledge about almost anything consisted chiefly of empirical facts, belief became the opposite of knowledge.” We are neither called on to sign off on creeds as empirical, scientifically measurable truth nor to believe in six impossible things before breakfast. We are called to give our hearts to Jesus, to set our hearts upon living as God would have us do. That is what it means to believe, even when we cannot believe as fully as we think we should.

The entirety of Rev. Taylor’s book, Learning to Walk in the Dark, resonates with the idea that we live with imperfect faith in our imperfect world and that we are blessed even in our imperfection. Early in the book, writing of her quest to understand her personal aversion to physical darkness, how it is shared by all our species, and what that means in our spiritual lives, she says, “when, despite all my best efforts, the lights have gone off in my life (literally or figuratively, take your pick), plunging me into the kind of darkness that turns my knees into water, nonetheless I have not died. The monsters have not dragged me out of bed and taken me back to their lair. The witches have not turned me into a bat (*or, I might add, a newt*). Instead, I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is really only one logical conclusion. I need darkness as much as I need light.”

Later in the book, she describes how some Christians are perfectly comfortable denying this truth she’s discovered that the darkness is as necessary as the light. She writes: “I call it “full solar spirituality,” since it focuses on staying in the light of God around the clock, both absorbing and

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reflecting the sunny side of faith. You can usually recognize a full solar church by its emphasis on the benefits of the faith, which include a sure sense of God's presence, certainty of belief, divine guidance in all things, and reliable answers to prayer. Members strive to be positive in attitude, firm in conviction, helpful in relationship, and unwavering in faith. This sounds like heaven on earth. Who would not like to dwell in God's light 24/7?"

In other words, there is validity to this spiritual approach for some people, just not for her. Nor, I would add, for me. She writes: "There are days when I would give anything to share their vision of the world and their ability to navigate it safely, but my spiritual gifts do not seem to include the gift of solar spirituality. Instead, I have been given the gift of lunar spirituality, in which the divine light available to me waxes and wanes with the season. When I go out on my porch at night, the moon never looks the same way to me twice. Some nights it is as round and bright as a headlight; other nights it is thinner than the sickle hanging in my garage. Some nights it is high in the sky, and other nights low over the mountains. Some nights it is altogether gone, leaving a vast web of stars that are brighter in its absence. All in all, the moon is a truer mirror for my soul than the sun that looks the same way every day."

My hope, my sisters and brothers, would be that here at Good Shepherd Baptist Church, we would make room for each other to have whichever of these spiritualities meets the needs of our spirits. Whether we are solar Christians or lunar Christians, we are called to love each other, to support each other, to weep together and to celebrate together. And I feel pretty certain, as certain as a lunar-type like me can, that we do indeed do this for each other. But if you don't understand or resonate with my idea that it is as much the unbelief of this man with the demon-ridden son that is blessed as his belief, then just chalk it up to the differences of our spirits. We'll try to love each other anyway, I think.

The disciples, bless them, were spiritually wise enough to understand that they'd blown it. Once the young man was healed and the crowd had dispersed, they went with Jesus to the house where they were staying and asked him, "Why could we not cast it out?" "He said to them, 'This kind can come out only through prayer.'" He reminded them to turn to God rather than relying on their own power. He reminded them that they, like the boy's father, had to be realistic and humble about their own spiritual might. Alan Culpepper ends his remarks on this story by writing, "The disciples were open to learning from their failure... Are we?" We must be ready to come humbly to our Loving Creator, confessing that we come "just as we are." The good news for us is that God awaits our coming, regardless of our level of belief and unbelief, regardless of whether we are solar Christians or lunar Christians, regardless, really, of everything. God holds a promise for us that no situation is too dire, no circumstance is beyond hope, that every silence, every darkness, every doubt holds a blessing. Nothing is impossible. Or to put it in words repeatedly used in Mark's Gospel, *panta dynata*, everything is possible. *Panta dynata*, everything is possible. *Panta dynata*.

Barbara Brown Taylor closes Learning to Walk in the Dark with a prayer from Thomas Merton: "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope

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that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.” *Panta dynata*. Thanks be to God. Amen.