



Centennial Bible Study: Deepening Faith Session 1

Faith in Action Mark 9.14-29

Gathering

Before the gathering, light a candle in the center of the table and place a basket beside it. Have small pieces of paper and pens available. On small pieces of paper, have each person write a hope or a concern, fold it over and put in basket near the candle. Leave them there as a reminder during the study.

Opening Prayer:

Set us free, O God, from the bondage of our sins, and give us the liberty of that abundant life which you have made known to us in your Son our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen. (*Book of Common Prayer*, p. 216)

Opening questions:

- Have you ever perceived that a prayer was answered? How did you know?
- Is there a prayer which you have given up on? If so, why?
- What is the difference between “healing” and “curing”?

Encounter the Word

Have a volunteer read the following verses, while others follow along. You may choose to read the text in several translations, noticing differences in translation.

When they came to the disciples they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. He asked them, “What are you arguing about with them?” Someone from the crowd answered him, “Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.” He answered them, “You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.” And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.” Jesus said to him, “If you are able! – All things can be done for the one who believes.” Immediately the father of the child cried out, “I believe; help my unbelief!” When Jesus saw that a crowd came running

together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!" After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" He said to them, "This kind can come out only through prayer." (NRSV, Mark 9:40-29)

In the first half of Mark's Gospel (1-9.8) Jesus is primarily a healer, exorcist, and miracle worker. Mark tells us from the very beginning that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of God" (1.1). Mark shows us who Jesus is by his acts of power, which leave onlookers speechless. In the second half of the Gospel, Mark changes tactics to reveal Christ's messiahship through his conflicts with opponents and predictions of his suffering as he journeys to the cross. The revelation of Jesus' power reaches a pinnacle at the Trans-figuration (Mark 9.2-8); Jesus' appearance is transformed to reflect his divinity, and select disciples hear a voice from heaven: "This is my Son, my beloved. Listen to him!"

Coming down from this mountaintop experience, Jesus returns to the daily grind of ministry. He finds the disciples he left behind arguing with religious authorities. As Jesus tries to figure out what is going on, a man from the crowd comes forward asking Jesus to heal his son. Many commentators believe the boy suffered from a form of epilepsy. In the father's words, the boy is possessed by "a spirit that makes him unable to speak." The man complains that Jesus' disciples could not exorcise the demon. Jesus responds with complaints of his own, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I put up with you?"

Engage and Reflect on the Word

In this passage it seems the wind has been taken out of the disciple's sails. Having earlier been commissioned by Jesus to expand his ministry of good news among the people, they "cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them" (6:13). Since the disciples had been given authority over unclean spirits, they now think they have a unique privilege. The fact that they were arguing with scribes shows that they have already begun to take their power for granted. Soon they will come to Jesus complaining that someone else is casting out demons in Jesus' name (9.38). Jesus again warns them - "Do not stop him, for...whoever is not against us is for us." The disciples do not yet have the whole picture of what discipleship is all about.

As noted above, the first part of Mark defines Jesus' identity in terms of powerful acts. The second half portrays Jesus in conflict with authorities and as one who suffers. This story is the only exorcism in the second half of the gospel. Its position here, therefore, is not to confirm Jesus' role of Messiah or Son of God. That identity has already been made clear. Its effect is to provide two examples of discipleship, one negative (disciples) and one positive (the boy's father). This incident reminds the disciples that the authority they enjoy is a borrowed authority, granted as gift, and not to be exploited. The power to carry out the ministry entrusted to them can only come by way of faithful prayer.

The power of this kind of prayer is not located in the petitioner. Jesus' later remarks to the disciples, that their confident prayers can move mountains (11.24), only make sense if the one to whom they pray is both powerful and present. The boy's father models the kind of prayer that moves mountains - prayer that both trusts in God's presence and also acknowledges weakness in prayer. In this kind of prayer the strange nature of God's power becomes clear. Not only does it

heal and restore, but does so in a way that is abundantly present -- although hidden -- and self-giving.

For discussion:

- What do you make of the presence of demons in this passage? How do we postmodern people talk about them?
- On the basis of this passage, how would you describe Jesus' personality? The father's?
- Why do you think Jesus took action "when he saw the crowd running together"? How does the presence of "the crowd" affect the story?
- One writer has said "whoever does not see Jesus cannot follow him, and whoever does not follow him, cannot see him" (Augustine Stock). What do you think he means? Do you agree?
- Where do you see yourself in this story?
- What are areas of your life for which you say, "Lord I believe; help my unbelief?"

Closing

And what is prayer? When Jesus next returns to this subject, he will explicitly connect prayer to "the power of belief." To pray is to learn to believe in a transforming of self and world, which seems, empirically, impossible--as in "moving mountains." –Ched Myers, from *Binding the Strong Man*¹

Invite participants, if they feel comfortable, to share with the group what "mountains" they feel need moving in their lives. Then spend a moment in silence to pray over them and the prayers collected in the center of the table. ²

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¹ Quoted in Marie Noel Keller "Opening Blind Eyes: A Revisioning of Mark 8:22-10:52" *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, Winter 2001.

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