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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 19B)

September 13, 2015

Text: Mark 9:14–29

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Dear saints of God, by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the by the cleansing power of His most holy, precious blood, you are truly saints of God. You are, by virtue of your baptismal connection to Jesus, holy children of faith, righteous servants, and heirs of the Father's eternal kingdom. In God the Father's eyes, He sees nothing but the complete and perfect righteousness of His Son covering you. You have no defects, no sins, no failures. In a word, you are saints of God.

But I suspect that most of you don't feel like you're anywhere close to such a description. Did we not begin this service by saying, "We confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean. We have sinned against You in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone"? So which is it, naturally sinful or supernaturally saintly? You are and I are both; 100% saint and 100% sinner.

Today's gospel reading from Mark 9:14–29 provides a powerful reminder and illustration of this duality in which all Christians live. We see it in the failure of the disciples to cast out a demon even though they had successfully performed exorcisms before. Secondly, and maybe most clearly, we see it in the father of the demon-possessed boy. The father believes in Jesus' power and yet at the same time, doesn't believe.

Let's look at the disciples first. The verses just before our reading for today, Mark 9:1–13, recount Jesus' transfiguration. Our Lord took Peter, James, and John with Him to the top of the mountain. Verse 14 says, "When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them." The "they" refers to Jesus, Peter, James, and John. The "disciples" mentioned in vs. 14 are the remaining 9 disciples.

While Jesus, Peter, James, and John were on the Mount of Transfiguration, a man brought his demon-possessed son to the 9 disciples. He was really looking for Jesus but He was gone. The 9 disciples inquire into the man's dilemma. We learn from vs.

17-18 that his son was demon possessed. As a result of this possession, the boy was unable to speak and the evil spirit would often make the boy fall to the ground uncontrollably, grind his teeth, and foam at the mouth. According to vs. 22, the demon even tried to kill the boy. These moments must have been horrific, to say the least.

Well, the 9 disciples thought they could handle this situation without Jesus. They'd done this kind of thing before. The Bible says in Mark 6:7 that Jesus sent the 12 disciples out to preach the good news of the kingdom. The Lord also gave them "authority over unclean spirits." We did it once before, we'll do it again! Won't Jesus be proud?!

They failed miserably. The father of the demon possessed boy frankly told Jesus that "they were not able" (vs. 18). Can you imagine the embarrassment the 9 disciples must have felt? Don't forget, there was a crowd. And to top it off, Mark records in vs. 14 that the scribes were there too. An argument between the disciples and the scribes ensued. Maybe the scribes were trying to give them some pointers. Maybe they were just making fun of them. Mark doesn't tell us. But it's safe to say the 9 disciples were disappointed and embarrassed.

Let's turn our attention to the father of the boy. After giving Jesus the details of the boy's demonic possession, the boy's father makes his desperate plea, "But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us" (vs. 22). Did you notice that the man asks Jesus to "help us"? Both father and son were tormented because of the situation; the boy from the demon, the father from the inability to help his beloved son.

Jesus responds by saying, "If you can! All things are possible for one who believes" (vs. 23). Jesus almost sounds a bit chippy. What do you mean by saying "If you can"? Our Lord is emphatically saying, "Yes, I can help you. There's no need to say "if" I can help. But there must be faith in My ability to help." The father expresses his struggle in one of the clearest statements in all of holy Scripture. Vs. 25, "I believe; help my unbelief!"

He'd already met one disappointment with the disciples' inability to make good on their word. Now he stands before Jesus with the promise He can help the boy. But when the experiences of years of demonic possession meet head-to-head with the promise of deliverance, a battle begins in the father's heart and mind. "I believe; help my unbelief!"

Do we not easily relate to the father's struggle? We may not be facing demonic possession but we do face the relentless attacks of sin, life's adversities and disappointments, not to mention outright unbelief. When we least expect it, temptation hits us with ferocious intensity. We enter what some call "dry seasons" when God's Word seems dull and ineffective. Prayer sounds hollow.

In addition, our daily lives might be in upheaval due to any number of tests and trials. Devotion to Christ staggers during such times. We know Christ promises to sustain His people. God's Word promises that we are temples of the Holy Spirit but we feel alone, separated from God's presence. Have you been there? Maybe you're there now. "I believe; help my unbelief!" 100% saint and 100% sinner 100% of the time.

This is the perfect time to see how Jesus responds to these failures. First of all, Jesus rebukes the 9 disciples for their failure. Vs. 19, "O faithfulness generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?" The Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, teaches that the Lord disciplines His people. When there is failure, there is correction. When there is a weakness, there is godly training to improve our walk of faith. Where there is sin, there is forgiveness and reconciliation. There can be no growth in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus without discipline. Listen to what the writer to the Hebrews has to say about this subject in Hebrews 12:5-11,

"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives... God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ... For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."

God's discipline in our lives is proof of His love for us.

Secondly, we must see that Jesus casts out the demon in spite of the disciples' failure and the father's unbelief. God's love for us in Christ is much greater than our mistakes, sins, and unbelief. You need to hear that dear saints. God's love for you is greater than anything this world, the devil, and even you can throw at our Lord Jesus. I John 3:20 is a marvelous reminder of how super abounding the grace of God is in our lives, "Whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything." Christ's cross and empty tomb are greater than our self-imposed condemnation.

Unbelief was the cause of failure for both the disciples and the boy's father. The disciples thought they could handle things without Jesus while the father believed yet didn't believe Jesus could help. The answer to both is rather simple – faith in Jesus even when facing doubts from within and without.

The disciples asked Jesus why they couldn't cast out the demon. His response is most interesting. Instead of saying, "Try harder next time." He says, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer." Prayer is not something we Christians do to show off our spiritual muscles. Rather, prayer is the attitude and action of one who knows he is totally dependent upon God's grace and power.

Prayer is the very breath of faith speaking out in total trust and reliance upon Jesus. Lord, here is my problem. Only you can bring deliverance. Lord, I believe your promises of life, grace, and eternal joy but the devil, the world, and even my own sinful heart doubts your Word. "I believe; help my unbelief!" Such is the nature of prayer.

What the disciples had forgotten and what the father needed to know is found in prayer. Simple faith that looks beyond the circumstances, beyond the day to day experiences, and sees Jesus alone. In Him we discover who we are: real sinners that are real saints. Every day is a baptismal day of repentance, turning from sin, and rising to newness of saintly life through faith in the resurrected Jesus. Yes. You are sinners. And yes, you are saints. On the glory of the Last Day, you will know the full resurrection splendor of absolute sainthood without sin. 100% saint 100% of the time. Until then dear saints of God, you live by faith in the life and victory of the Lord Jesus.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.