

I Believe. I See.

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Confirmation Sunday

Mark 9:14-29

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 threw the boy* into convulsions, 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 keep 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.’*

I can still remember the first time I was truly able to experience the beauty of a tree. I was in sixth grade. My report card was solid, but my teacher, Mrs. Blanch, noticed that I rarely participated in class. If we have gotten to know each other over the past four years, you are probably aware that I am not the kind of person to sit quietly in a room or refrain from chatting and asking questions when something is on my mind. Mrs. Blanch was understandably concerned. After a lengthy parent-teacher conference one evening, the strangely embarrassing truth came out; I was not participating, because I could not see the marker board at the front of the classroom! In fact, I could not see anything clearly!

My piano teacher picked up on the challenge as well; while other students learned to sight-read quickly, I could not see the lines on the staff. I had to pretend that I was reading along and learned to play by ear. At times, it was even difficult to carry on basic conversations. Have you ever noticed how much people say with their facial expressions? It is hard to have a conversation when you're talking to a blur.

After the conference, my mother immediately booked an appointment at the local optometrist's office. Sure enough – like so many before, after and along with me – I was in dire need of glasses! Rather than being grateful for the new discovery, I was horrified! Cool-points were already hard to come-by in middle school and now GLASSES! Why me, God!? Why!?

If you think I am exaggerating about the terrifying nature of this scenario, let me describe the glasses that this guy managed to find; Think Harry Potter, but like five times bigger and seven times thicker! My world was over! I did not know how in the world I was going to survive high school with telescopes on my face... at least, that's what I thought to myself at first. Then, I stepped outside with my glasses for the first time. My eyes fixated on the huge maple tree that dominated our town square. It was as though I had stepped into the Artist's Garden with Monet after having stared at a kindergartener's sponge painting for a lifetime.

The lifeless red-orange blob was transformed into a thriving organism. Each branch took on its own life; hustling and bustling; casting its shadow on its siblings. I walked closer and picked up some fallen leaves; remnants of summer's passing

and fall's arriving. Each one had its own shape and character. The veins popped. The blades cracked. I had walked under that tree countless times before, but I had never truly seen it until I put on my big ugly glasses.

The ninth chapter of Mark's Gospel kicks-off with a dynamite story. Jesus sojourns to a mountaintop and is transformed, transfigured, transmuted before his disciple's very eyes. The dust and dirt of the earthly are washed clean as heavenly perfection breaks the divide between immanence and transcendence; between what could be and what is. It must have been a sight to see, but it's not the story we read this morning. We are stuck with a tale about what happened after Peter, James, John, and Jesus came down from the mountain and stepped back into the real world.

When the dazzled quartet reconnects with the other disciples, they find themselves in a real mess. While Jesus was away, the rest of the bumbling cohort had gotten into yet another argument. A parent had come to them in search of a cure for his sick child. Like interns in an operating room, or at a communion table, they fumbled around with the tools of the trade that their supervisor's hand handled so masterfully. They undoubtedly breathed a sigh of relief when Jesus came down to rescue them from their turmoil.

In the strange and emotionally jarring discourse that follows, Jesus seems to vacillate between the role of prophet, the cultural critic of his day, and that of a physician, carefully questioning and examining his patient to ensure continuity of care.

In a surprising turn, Jesus cuts the examination short and turns the father's own request back on him. "If you are able, all things can be done for the one who believes." If you are able? The father and the rest of the crowd must have been taken aback! If the father was able, what did he need Jesus for? If he were able, if belief is all it takes to make things better, does his persistence, even in the face of the disciple's inability to live up to his expectations not testify to his fidelity? Does the crowd's hope-filled longing for a miracle not count for something? Does a father's cry for compassion, even pity, upon his suffering son not merit a more 'pastoral' response?

The father undoubtedly takes a moment to collect himself before offering a diplomatic reply. Along the way, he stumbles into a statement that echoes across the centuries as a foundational affirmation of faith. He musters the courage and says to Jesus, "I believe, help my unbelief."

A cry of desperation? A shot in the dark? A leap of faith? Maybe. But it is also something more; it must be something more. This simple statement of faith has been a source of constant reflection throughout church history. Augustine and Anselm believed so that they might understand. Kierkegaard's English translators had him taking leaps of faith. Lewis believed in Christianity so that, by it, he might see everything else- So that by it, he might see a way forward through life's suffering and pain; So that he might make a treaty with reality; so that he could navigate the challenges that lie before him. This classic statement, "I believe, help my unbelief," resonates with all of us.

If this statement is not an admission of the paradox, the seeming contradiction, at the heart of our faith, I do not know what is. Many interpreters, both ancient and modern, have read this simple confession as a bulwark, a fortress, a defense, against the world's onslaught upon the basic propositions of our religion. Christian apologists are quick to quote this text when scientific explorations fill gaps in human understanding that God used to inhabit. At their best, these readings challenge us not to submit too quickly to the modern tendency to construct a demystified worldview that is unable to accept life's complexities. At their worst, they offer up easy answers that are designed to keep us from having to think too hard.

If we want to steer clear of half-truths, we must remember that the father's over-whelmed—stressed-out response is as much a prayer as a confession; At least, that is how Jesus heard it. After the dust settles, the disciples use the language of their time and ask why they could not cast out the "spirit." Jesus' response is straightforward, at least it would have been to them. He says, "This kind can come out only through prayer." Well, whose prayer? In this case, the father's prayer and that of Jesus when they meet together.

However genuine his faith was, the troubled father in this morning's story knew that he could not save his son alone. He needed someone to walk with him from suffering to assurance, from loss to love, from faith to hope. Following in

Christ's way is about more than mountaintop experiences; Most of you know that. It is about more than the moments of radical life-altering transformation. It is about more than having all our beliefs in order and your doctrines right. Sometimes being Christian means taking our half-broken, misshaped, incomplete faith to God, asking for help, and trusting that God will make a way out of no way. Sometimes walking the road of discipleship, is about setting aside our desire to make sense of everything and trusting in redemption's promise. Sometimes earnest prayer requires putting on new glasses so that our faulty eyes might catch a glimpse of God's glorious handiwork.

Who among us cannot recall a time when we were forced to live in the tension between our hope-filled beliefs and our real-life experiences? Who among us cannot recall a moment when we have come face to face with the limits of our own ability to see God's promised future? Who among us has not stumbled into the realization that self-reliance does indeed have its limits; that none of us can handle the stuff that life throws at us alone?

It is a strange truth that one must have tasted faith if one is too long for it. Our way of looking at the world probably does not make much sense to people outside of our group. Nevertheless, the story of Christianity, the story of all of us, is that of a group of people who have learned to live – and are trying to learn anew how to live – at the intersection of confident hope and prayerful submission to the unpredictableness of life. It is the story of a people who know what it is like to wander through a blurry world, longing to see clearly through the lenses of belief. It is the story of a people who have learned to say, we believe, and somehow, see. We see through our own ever-present unbelief and into the sure hope of God's coming again.

We believe that God has promised to heal the world in Jesus Christ, and so we see a church that reflects the love of a savior who steps down from the mountaintop and into the muck so that a sick child might be transfigured as he was. We believe that God is not done with us yet, and so we see a world where our hopes for justice, freedom, and peace become a reality; not just for us, but for everyone. We believe in God's story, and so we see how our own story is linked to those of others. We believe, and so we come here, time and time again to make our prayer of confession to God. To say together, "I believe, help my unbelief."

It is in a spirit of belief that we approach this day. For, it is on this day that young believers are invited to take up the baptismal covenant; to recognize the ways in which their story is connected with that of the broader church, not only here in Bryn Mawr, but in every time and place. It is on this day that our church's eighth-graders step out in faith, professing that they too believe, and so they see.

The promise of the gospel remains true for all of God's children, regardless of their age or situation. Like everything we do at church, this day is not just about one age-group or population. Faith is always affirmed at the place where the "I believe" of personal confession meets the "we believe" of the whole church's proclamation.

Jesus' assuring words reign as true for each and every one of you as they did for the believers of old. His promise to meet you at the intersection of belief and brokenness will never be shaken. He is able to meet you in your suffering and raise you up to new possibilities for renewal, healing, and growth.

Your faith journey has been and will continue to be a personal one, but it is not solitary. Through it all, you have never been, and you will never be alone. For the Confirmands among us, this day is about laying claim to the beliefs that your family, friends and fellow Christians have held in trust on your behalf until this day. Today you will take them up for yourself and say with all the disciples that have gone before you, 'I too believe, and so I see God's world anew in Jesus Christ.' For the rest of us, this day is an opportunity for us to reaffirm the faith to which we cling when prayer is our last resort and our only hope. It is an opportunity to pass on a rickety, over-sized, completely un-cool pair of glasses that helps us to bring the world's blurriness into focus.

For some of you, today might feel like a graduation service; but you will never graduate from church. Confirmation is not the end of faith, it is one of many steps along the journey that is discipleship. I would be lying to you if I said living life as a Christian is easy. There will be times when you ask God, "Why me!?" Why must I carry the burden of these beliefs, these expectations, this calling? Why do I have to hang out with church people whom I do not always like, and with whom I often disagree?

People of God, whether you are being Confirmed today or not, my prayer for you is that you will leave here knowing that you will never be alone in the household of God. I pray that God gives you the ability to live with depth, passion, and gravitas—to search for meaning, truth, and justice at all costs and without qualification or exception. I pray that through the power of God's spirit, you will continue to worship together as a community who believes boldly and prays hard; saying, I believe, and so I see. I believe, and so I see a God that is big enough to hold my doubts, my questions, and my insecurities. I believe, and so I see a church where the voiceless are given voice through our common prayers for divine compassion and deliverance. I believe, and so I see a world where everyone has a chance to see God's dreams for their lives come into focus. I believe, and so I see a way forward for each of us together. I see a way forward to live into the compassion, grace, and mercy that God has shown each and every one of us in Jesus Christ; A way forward that affirms the truth that this baptismal covenant we make before God together can never be broken; a way forward, together.

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