

## Help My Unbelief

Mark 9:14-29

Last week, Nike made headlines with a new ad campaign, featuring Colin Kaepernick, the former 49ers quarterback who became controversial by kneeling during the national anthem to protest police brutality and racial inequalities. The ad states, "Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything." Since Kaepernick has not been able to find a job in the NFL since he began the protest, even though he's probably a better quarterback than some of the current starting QB's in the NFL, the ad shows the importance of staying true to your principles even when there is pressure not to do so.

Of course, since we're in the internet age, the ad led to a lot of parodies. Some featured other NFL players. Others featured pop culture references like Thanos from Avengers: Infinity War. Some pointed out the hypocrisy of Nike seemingly promoting a social justice cause while still using sweatshop labor to produce their products. And of course, there were some with Jesus, featuring the same tag line, "Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything."

The problem with Nike's ad, no matter what you think of Kaepernick's politics and actions, is that it doesn't really seem to care what you believe in, as long as you believe in something. But if you believe in the wrong thing, if you put your trust in something that can't handle it, then it will fail you. In today's Gospel lesson, believing in something is important, and it seems as though there are many that don't seem to believe in anything. Yet as it goes on, we see that it is not just believing that is important; it's what you believe in. It's who you believe in.

To put this in context, Jesus and three of his disciples, Peter, James, and John, had just been up on the Mount of Transfiguration. They had seen Moses and Elijah, and seen Jesus shine and his clothes became whiter than anyone on Earth could make them. They'd heard the voice from the cloud say, "This is my beloved son. Listen to him!" They had their faith in Jesus confirmed. They still didn't quite understand everything about Jesus, but they knew they could believe in him.

The other nine disciples left at the base of the mountain, though, aren't having that kind of day. They're arguing with the scribes, and although we're not told directly

how it's going, it would seem the disciples are not winning the debate. More than that, there's a man there with a son who has been afflicted by an evil spirit for years. The disciples, who had been commissioned to drive out demons when they were first sent out two by two on their first mission trip, have been unable to do anything.

Finally, the father asks Jesus to heal his son if he can. He hopes Jesus can heal his son. He's heard enough stories that he knows it's possible. Yet he still struggles. He's been coping with his son's condition for so long, presumably tried any number of cures and healings and exorcisms, that he's afraid to be hopeful and believe one more time. Like a Cyclones fan who believes Iowa State could beat Iowa or Oklahoma, yet has been disappointed far too often to really believe, like a Chicago Bears fan who believes they could finally beat the Green Bay Packers at Lambeau Field when they're up by 20 and Aaron Rodgers is injured, he believes, but he's expecting to be disappointed.

When Jesus hears this, he responds, "if you can! All things are possible for one who believes." The father responds "I believe; help my unbelief!" That doesn't sound like much faith. But it's enough. Jesus heals the son, drives out the demon, and restores him to his father.

"Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief!" Some days, that's all we can do. Some days, that's our prayer. Sometimes, our faith is shaken when we've been praying for years, and have yet to receive the answer we hoped for. Sometimes, our faith is shaken when scandals in the church or the moral failings of those who claim to be Christian make us wonder how something so imperfect could be right about God. Sometimes, our faith is shaken when literal storms and floods come, and we wonder where a loving God is as peoples' lives are washed away. Sometimes, our faith is shaken when we face sickness or financial troubles or relationship troubles. Sometimes, our faith is shaken when we encounter another scientific theory that doesn't line up with the Bible. No matter who we are or where we are, there are things that make us doubt, and wonder how we will be able to believe.

Yet if we start by believing, we'll see miracles. The father saw his son healed. The disciples saw Jesus as the one they could believe in, even as they doubted their own abilities. The crowd saw a miracle, which made them wonder who Jesus really was.

They'd soon see who Jesus was. The father in our Gospel lesson loved his son and despaired over the suffering of his only child. But God loves you so much that he sent his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to die for you, so that if you believe in him, you won't perish, but instead inherit eternal life (John 3:16). As the Apostle Paul writes, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32).

The father wasn't the only one who would struggle with doubt. After Jesus died and rose from the dead, one of the nine disciples left at the base of the mountain, Thomas, would doubt it had happened. When he was told of Jesus' appearance to the other disciples, Thomas answered defiantly, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe".

Yet Jesus didn't leave him in his doubts. The risen Jesus appeared to the disciples again and said to them, "Peace be with you," calming their fears. More than that, then Jesus turned to Thomas with outstretched arms and said, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but *believe*."

Martin Luther believes this is the lesson of the Thomas episode. "We may learn how Christ loves us, and how amiably, fatherly, gently, and mildly he deals with us and would deal with us.... He does not desire to overturn or reject the weak in faith, but bears patiently with their weakness, not snarling at them frightfully, but handling them gently and respectfully."

We all have trouble believing sometimes. We all have friends or family or neighbors who have trouble believing. We can't argue them into believing – we can only help clear away the obstacles that are keeping them from believing. We can't scold them into believing – we can only encourage them to continue to search for knowledge, and pray for them. We shouldn't leave them alone in their doubts, but should walk

alongside them and guide them on their journey of discovery.

Believe in something. Believe in the one who answers the prayers of those who are struggling with unbelief. Believe in the one who came to doubting Thomas after his resurrection and showed the holes in his hands and side. Believe in the one who healed the son and restored him to his father. Believe in the one who sacrificed everything for you.

Pastor David Beagley  
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center, Ames,  
Iowa  
September 16, 2018