

Help My Unbelief

Mark 9:14-29

It's easy to be cynical when you're always waiting for the other shoe to drop. When you know you're going to be disappointed. After all of the changes of the last year, hoping to get back to normal and then having another change, another round of cancelations, we're all familiar with that idea.

Columnist Mike Royko of the Chicago Tribune knew the futility of being a Cubs fan. He wrote about being a Cubs fan, "It taught a person that if you try hard enough and long enough, you'll still lose, and that's the story of life." He also wrote, "A Pessimist sees the glass as half empty; A Cub Fan wonders when it's gonna spill."

When I first came to Ames, I was told that being a Cubs fan was good preparation for being a Cyclones fan. The Cyclones, too, had a history of futility. They had a history of losing in heartbreaking fashion. Of course, I've seen that in my time here. Getting to the NCAA tournament, only for George Niang to hurt his foot. Losing to Iowa 44-41 in overtime after leading by a touchdown near the end of the 4th quarter in 2017. The list goes on and on. I'm sure many watched the game against UNI last week with that same feeling of dread, knowing Iowa State has started slowly before, and a 6 point lead wasn't enough room for comfort in the 4th quarter.

The father in today's Gospel lesson has reason to be cynical. His son has been afflicted with a demon since childhood. It makes him convulse and foam at the mouth. It makes the child go into fire or water to try to destroy him. The father has tried everything, and nothing has worked. He finally heard about Jesus, and came to find him, only to discover that Jesus was up on a mountain. The disciples try to help the

boy, but they cannot. And now he's down to his last chance. Jesus is finally here, but the father still doubts. The father still questions. The father has had his hopes raised before, only to have them dashed once again.

This time, though, things are different. The father hasn't put his faith in just anyone. The father hasn't found another quack doctor. Instead, he's found Jesus. And so he's hopeful, but afraid to be let down again.

"If you can do anything," the father pleaded, "have compassion on us and help us."

"If you can!" Jesus quipped. "All things are possible for one who believes."

There was a bit of rebuke in Jesus' words. There was also a ray of hope and a way out. "All things are possible for one who believes." What is impossible for us is possible through faith, through God, through Jesus. Throughout his ministry, he made miracles happen! And now, in his last chance, the father has hope again.

That's when the father cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" Some ancient manuscripts add that he burst into tears. He was caught between hoping for the impossible and afraid to be let down again. We could expand on the father's prayer a little this way: Lord, I want to believe! I really do! I know you can do miracles. But I just can't see it right now. I'm full of so many doubts. I want to believe, so help my unbelief!

And Jesus did! He gave faith to the doubting father and took away the disbelief of the disciples. Jesus commanded the demon to come out, and out it came!

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.

That’s how our faith is, too. Faith comes before the fulfillment. We’re asked to believe before we see the results. How can we do that? Because we trust the one asking us to believe. We know that Jesus has kept his promises, and we trust that he will continue to do so.

We read in the Lutheran confessions, “Worthiness does not depend on the greatness or smallness, the weakness or strength of faith. Instead, it depends on Christ’s merit, which the distressed father of little faith enjoyed as well as Abraham, Paul, and others who have a joyful and strong faith.”

“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.

C.S. Lewis, in his book *The Screwtape Letters*, imagines a mentor demon, Screwtape, writing to a mentee demon on how best to lead a human

away from God. In one chapter, the mentee demon is excited that his human patient is going through a trough, a period of dryness and doubt. Screwtape warns his mentee not to be so quick to judge. Humans follow a law of undulation, a series of peaks and troughs in all areas of their lives, but especially in their religious life. Humans know they were created for something more, and are continually striving for that, but also fall back. Both God and the devil can use these changes. Their goals, though, are totally different. Screwtape writes that “We want cattle who can finally become food; He wants servants who can finally become sons. We want to suck in, He wants to give out. We are empty and would be filled; He is full and flows over.”

It is in the troughs, it is in the valleys, that people learn to trust God not because of his presence, but in spite of its lack. Screwtape ends his letter with the advice that “Our cause is never more in danger, than when a human, no longer desiring, but intending, to do our Enemy's will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.”

We may still struggle with cynicism. We may still find it hard to hope for the Cyclones to win. We may still struggle with wondering when the next shoe will drop. We still may go through troughs and valleys in our faith and in our lives. But we can go through those challenges with hope. We can believe with hope. We can believe in Jesus, the one who healed the son and restored him to his father. We can believe in the one who sacrificed everything for you. With faith in Jesus, we always have hope.

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