

16 September 2012
Pentecost 16

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“A Model Prayer”

Text: Mark 9:14-29 (James 3:1-12)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!

I cannot think of a better description of a Christian or of the Christian life than that. Six little words that encapsulate our lives so perfectly.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. First we need to consider the story we heard those words in today that led up to this marvelous confession.

Jesus, Peter, James, and John had just come down from the Mount of Transfiguration to rejoin the other nine disciples. Which means that while Jesus was showing His divine nature and glory to Peter, James, and John by shining like the sun and conversing with Moses and Elijah about the fact that He, God in the flesh, had come to die for the sin of the world . . . while that was happening on top of the mountain, this was taking place at the foot of the mountain.

Now picture the scene. It had started off well. A father, concerned for his son who is in desperate need, brings his son to Jesus. Which is the first interesting thing in this story: the father says to Jesus, ***“I brought him to you”*** even though, technically and literally speaking, he didn't. Jesus wasn't there. But in asking the disciples to cast out the spirit who was possessing his son, he recognizes the disciples as those authorized and sent by Jesus to do these things, and so really the same as bringing his son to Jesus.

So he asks the disciples to cast out the spirit, but they are not able. And as a result an argument breaks out. An argument that apparently is drawing a great crowd. You know the kind - as voices raise to yelling and accusations fly back and forth. But here's the next interesting part: the boy and his father are still there! The father still worried and concerned and the son still possessed and in desperate need while the scribes and disciples are standing around arguing. It seems a bit like arguing about whose fault it was that the Titanic struck the iceberg while the ship is listing and sinking. Or like whose fault it is that our national debt is as great as it is while those numbers on the debt clock keep flashing higher and higher. You can almost imagine

that after Jesus comes up to them and asks them what they are arguing about, and the father tells him, they go right back to their arguing - right in front of Jesus!

Did not! Did too! You can't! We can! Frauds! Hypocrites!

And that's when Jesus plants His face in His hand and sighs: ***"O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me."***

And in the embarrassed silence that settles over the crowd, Jesus puts the focus back on the child, back on his desperate need. And back to the real problem here - the faith problem, which showed itself in the scribes, the disciples, and the father. The father, the honest one here, who in confusion, in desperation, in faith, and probably on the verge of tears and at the end of his rope, finally cries out to Jesus: ***"Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!"***

He really did believe. That's why he came. That's why he brought his son to Jesus in the first place. And what does he believe? That Jesus can help. That Jesus wants to help. That Jesus has come to help. And yet at the same time there's something else in him that he wrestles with - those doubts . . . that he's not worthy of Jesus help; that maybe Jesus doesn't want to help him; that maybe he's beyond Jesus' help. He's this mixed up jumble of belief and unbelief, of saint and sinner.

Just like us.

For this is really what we're saying every time we confess our sins: ***Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.*** I believe that you are the Son of God who came to die for my sins on the cross. I believe that you have given me my faith and new life. I believe in your promise of forgiveness and that I am your child. I believe that you are blessing me and working all things for my good; that you are merciful and gracious. Yes, I believe all this.

And yet . . . I have lived this day, this week, as if I didn't. As if everything were up to me instead of living as a child of God and trusting in my heavenly Father. As if I were in competition with others instead of seeing them as ones you have put here for me to help and care for. When trouble came I doubted your love and when it stayed I doubted your mercy. And when things were going good, I didn't even think of you much of that time, as the one who was giving me that good.

That's why I've complained and failed to thank you. That's why my tongue which blesses you here on Sunday spoke harsh and unloving things this week. That's why I've been quick to accuse and slow to forgive. That's why I've rejoiced in others failures and was jealous at their success and good fortune. I believe, and yet . . .

what a jumbled, mixed-up sack of belief and unbelief I am. **Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.** Forgive me, restore me, help me, strengthen me.

That's what we say every time we come to Jesus in the Lord's Prayer and pray for forgiveness. It's also what we say at the beginning of every Divine Service here, when we come to Jesus *through* the one He authorized and sent here to speak His word of forgiveness to us. And your sins are forgiven. Not because your prayer is so good, or your pastor can do so, but because of the promise of your Saviour when after His resurrection from the dead He said to His disciples, "*As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you. . . . If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them . . .*" (John 20:21-23).

So don't overlook this fact: the first person Jesus helped here was the father, who had been bruised and battered over the difficulties with his son, with the arguing of those who should have been helping him, and with his own struggles of faith. Jesus addresses him first, exposing his unbelief in order to help him, too. As He now does for you and me.

Then Jesus turns to the boy - this boy whom an unclean spirit has been trying to destroy **since childhood**, the father says. Or, that is to say: *ever since he has been my son*. You can almost hear the weariness in the father's voice . . .

This is a picture of our situation as well - *before* we were the jumbled, mixed-up sack of belief and unbelief that we are. For just as Jesus spoke to that boy and gave him life, so Jesus has done for us. For in baptism, through water and the Word, Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit in each of us and raises us from being dead in sin to a new life in Him (Romans 6).

So both father and son were cleansed, renewed, and restored. As usual, Jesus gives even more than is asked or expected. And not by two miracles, but really by one and the same miracle: **the forgiveness of sins**. For that is the help that we need at all times and in all places - the cleanness and new life of baptism and the return to that cleanness and new life in forgiveness. And, like the father, because our sinful nature often gets the best of us, this washing and cleansing and raising of forgiveness is not just a one time, or a weekly, or even a daily, but a *continual* promise. That wherever we are and whatever situation we find ourselves in, **Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!** is exactly what Jesus has come to do. To forgive our sin. To strengthen our faith. To give us new life.

Which is why Jesus came down from the Mount of Transfiguration and did not stay there. The transfiguration shows us that the one who hung on the cross for us was no mere man, but God Himself - the divine and glorious Son of God in human flesh. And that Son of God in human flesh would be *the Son* destroyed by the

unclean spirits, convulsed and cast into the fire and water of their venom and evil. Not because they were more powerful than He, but because He put Himself there, in our place, to bear our uncleanness and so be the unclean one forsaken by His Father, and die our death. And those who were there at the cross that day - disciples, soldiers, and onlookers alike - all said (like they did in our story today), **He is dead**. And this Son really was . . . until three days later, He was the Son made alive again in the resurrection, that joined to Him there may be new life for us too.

And that is the new life has been given to you, for baptism and forgiveness - like we saw with the son and his father - are like little resurrections. Jesus coming to us and taking us by the hand and saying *arise*. Arise from your unbelief; arise from your uncleanness; arise and live a new life. And rising, He now bids us come to His table to be fed by Him. That the resurrection to faith and new life given by Him be now strengthened by Him - with His own Body and Blood. That sin and uncleanness not have free reign in our lives, but that Christ now live in us.

And He does. So even though **Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!** is our prayer and will always be our prayer as long as we live on this side of eternity, it is no longer a prayer of despair, but of confidence and hope. For as we live simultaneously as saints declared righteous and sinners who fall, it is always as dear children of God in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Our Saviour who came down from heaven to be born in our flesh, who came down from His Transfiguration to die our death, and now resurrected and ascended still comes down to you and me to help and to heal, to restore and renew, to forgive and to favor.

So do not despair, do not doubt, do not fear. Pray. Pray **Lord, I believe; help my unbelief**. For confessing who you are, you also confess who He is: the holy one of God, the lover of man, your Saviour.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.