

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 2024

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: Come one and all to meet God here.
All: We have come that God might raise us up.
One: Come, all who are weary and oppressed.
All: God hears our prayers...and offers relief.
One: God's glory abides in this place of worship.
All: God's presence and help are real.
One: Come together to sing songs of praise to God.
All: Give thanks for God's wondrous deeds.

***OPENING HYMN** "God of Compassion, in Mercy Befriend Us" GtG 436

**1. God of compassion, in mercy befriend us,
giver of grace for our needs all-availing.
Wisdom and strength for each day ever send us,
patience untiring and courage unfailing.**

**2. Though we are lost, you have sought us and found us,
stilled our rude hearts with your word of consoling.
Wrap now your peace, like a mantle, around us,
guarding our thoughts and our passions controlling.**

**3. How shall we stray, with your hand to direct us,
you who the stars in their courses are guiding?
What shall we fear, with your power to protect us,
we who walk forth in your greatness confiding?**

Words: John J. Moment, 1933, alt.
Music: O QUANTA QUALIA, Paris *Antiphoner*, 1681;
harm. La Feillee's *Methode du plain-chant*, 1808
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UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

You promise to guide us in life, O God, but we're not sure. Our steps to follow you are tentative. Our commitment to learn from you is half-hearted. Our faith in you is weak. Forgive us, gracious God. Be patient with our weaknesses and tender in your correction. Assure us of your loving presence. Rekindle within us the fire of faith made sure and certain through the power of your Spirit. For it is in Christ's name that we pray. Amen.

SILENT CONFESSION

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

One: The Lord is indeed a God of mercy and compassion. We know this for certain because of Jesus Christ.

All: **In Christ, God seeks the lost and forgives the sinner and loves the world.**

One: So let us hear and believe that good news once again.

All: **For by the grace of God we are loved and accepted, forgiven and restored through Jesus Christ our Lord. Alleluia! Amen.**

THE PEACE

One: The peace of Christ be with you all.

All: **And also with you.**

(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE READING Mark 9:14-29

MARK 9:14-29 (New Revised Standard Version, updated edition)

¹⁴ When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them and some scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵ When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. ¹⁶ He asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" ¹⁷ Someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak, ¹⁸ 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." ¹⁹ He answered them, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me." ²⁰ And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. ²¹ Jesus asked the father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. ²² It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, help us! Have

compassion on us!”²³ Jesus said to him, “If you are able! All things can be done for the one who believes.”²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out, “I believe; help my unbelief!”²⁵ When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!”²⁶ 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.”²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand.²⁸ When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?”²⁹ He said to them, “This kind can come out only through prayer.”

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON by Pastor Bill Vincent

“I believe; help my unbelief!”

The cry echoes down the centuries, from heart to heart, soul to soul.

It escapes from our own lips.

What do we hear from these words, more than the plaintive cry of agony and desperation?

What can we learn from this story that might help us cope the next time these words spill from our lips, the next time they reverberate in our hearts?

Jesus has just accused this “*generation*” – a fairly broad term seeming to include everybody – Jesus has just accused this “*generation*” of being “*faithless*.”

Then he speaks of “*the one who believes*,” who has faith.

The father then admits – very openly, very honestly – that he has one foot in each camp.

The cry of the father is our experience, or at least much of our experience: the place in life where most of us are some of the time and where many of us are most of the time.

What N.T. Wright describes as

the mixture of despair and trust that so often seems to characterize our prayers when things are tough... the shadowy world of half-belief where one is never sure whether one can see properly or not. (*Mark for Everyone*, p.88)

Yet Jesus says, “*All things can be done for the one who believes*.”

We may know, or think we know – or wish we knew – the power of such faith, belief, trust as Jesus indicates.

But there’s a portion of me that believes...or that believes only in part.

And I need help with the part of me that is not there yet: the small belief, the weak belief; or the times when I’m not sure I believe at all.

“I believe; help my unbelief!”

It is my cry.

It is your cry.

It is – or should be – the cry of the disciples: they who have stumbled mightily on this journey of faith, belief, trust. As witnessed by their inability to cast out the unclean spirit; their not understanding who this Jesus really is, what he is really about.

“I believe; help my unbelief!”

Maybe it is a reminder that faith – this belief, this trust – is not so much
-a possession to grasp, something to have – “Got it!” “I figured it out!” –

-or a finish line to cross, a destination to reach – “I have arrived!” –

as it is a relationship: a process that I am better at sometimes than others.

Kathleen Norris describes faith as something that

is a constant, always there, but surging and ebbing, sometimes strongly evident and at other times barely discernible.... (*Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, p.170)

“I believe; help my unbelief!”

Maybe, too, it is an acknowledgment – a confession – that faith is, in many ways, a gift I receive in the context of this particular relationship. A gift that I can no more grasp for myself than the Man in the Moon. A gift that I can at best be open to receive, and be hopeful to receive, and be grateful in those moments when I do receive.

And notice who stands at the center of that process, that relationship, that gift.

Jesus himself.

Who, yes, berates everyone for their lack of faith.

Yet still sticks with them, and offers his compassion and demonstrates his power, nonetheless.

Frederick Buechner, as he is talking about faith, starts with the story of Abraham and Sarah (*Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, p.24-25). You remember: Abraham is 100 years old, Sarah is 90 years old; and they are told they are going to have a child, their own child. Ha, ha! It is folly. It is laughable – so they are to name him Isaac, meaning “laughter.”

Yet they end up embracing the promise, not so much it seems because of the actual, specific promise made as because of the Promise-maker.

The call has been issued to the disciples: the call to discipleship. “Follow me,” Jesus says, “Deny yourself, take up your cross; lose your life to save it.” It seems sheer folly. A laughable formula.

But the invitation is extended to embrace the call, not so much because of the actual call extended as because of the One who extends the call.

One who has demonstrated his trustworthiness time and time again, who keeps coming back to us, never giving up on us. And, as the story continues – and as we know – not even death will stop him from being present to us.

He may be disappointed in the weak, imperfect, inadequate, small faith we display. And he certainly challenges us to do better.

But he also ‘honors’ what little faith we may bring.

Like the faith of that father: half-baked, **“only begun.”** But a faith that **“could be made better,”** that could be built upon, that could grow (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.14.7).

Now, when we acknowledge that Christ accepts what little faith we may have, this is not to suggest that, “Oh, Jesus will take care of it; I don’t need to do anything.” No.

If anything, his receiving us with what little faith we have, encourages us to do more. For in seeing Jesus respond, even in the face of little faith, we are touched by grace and inspired, even the more so, to have faith: to step out and to trust in God’s gracious power, in God’s Son and his care and compassion for us.

For remember: in spite of the imperfect – even inadequate – faith of the father, the boy is healed – through no merit of his father.

As Paul Achtemeier notes,

the story deals with faith, and primarily with Jesus’ ability to perform his healing deeds despite its absence. ... Nowhere is there any hint that the father finally did achieve sufficient faith. The point is...God’s power at work in Jesus is so strong that neither imperfect (verse 24) nor even absent (verse 19) faith can thwart it. (*Invitation to Mark*, p.135)

And our cry is answered, too – though not necessarily in the way we might want, or intended, or expected.

For sometimes – sometimes – our cry for compassion, for help, for mercy is answered simply with a presence: God’s presence...if we will but open our heart to that presence – but that, too, may be part of the process of faith.

Again Norris:

People who are in the habit of praying...know that when a prayer is answered, it is never in a way that you expect. (p.60-61)

But still answered.

And speaking of prayer – as Jesus does at the end of our story – prayer is a place where we practice that faith, small as it may be. We refer to prayer as a ‘spiritual practice’ – a spiritual discipline, a point of learning – where we practice our faith (our trust) in God...and where our faith (our trust) is nurtured.

The kind of prayer, as described by Lamar Williamson, that

is not pious manipulation of God to get what we want, but communing with God in the wilderness where Satan is confronted and overcome (1:12,35; 6:46) and wrestling alone in the night to submit one’s own will to that of God (14:32-42). (*Mark*, Interpretation series, p.166)

For if faith is that process – that relationship – of trust, then prayer is the conversation of that relationship.

Where, yes, we talk with God: we cry out to God, we make our needs and concerns and yearnings known to God.

But also...well, remember what we mentioned last week: waking up in the morning and saying, “God, what can I do for you today?” That’s prayer. That’s part of our conversation.

But there’s another crucial part to our conversation (prayer) that is all-too-often overlooked. And that is: shutting up long enough for God to answer, or for us to hear God’s answer. And please know I say that as strongly as I do – I say that as much for myself as for anyone else.

“I believe, God...sort of...kind of...sometimes more than others. I want to believe; I’m not always sure I believe. Help me in my weakness. Help me in my hesitancy. Help me in my unbelief.”

And God will.

For our Lord stands right there with you, even in your imperfect faith.

He stands right there with you, in all things, at all times.

You can trust him for that.

***HYMN** “My Faith Looks Up to Thee” GtG 829

1. **My faith looks up to thee,
thou Lamb of Calvary,
Savior divine!
Now hear me while I pray;
take all my guilt away;
O let me from this day
be wholly thine!**
2. **May thy rich grace impart
strength to my fainting heart,
my zeal inspire;
as thou has died for me,
O may my love to thee
pure, warm, and changeless be,
a living fire!**
3. **While life's dark maze I tread
and griefs around me spread,
be thou my guide;
bid darkness turn to day;
wipe sorrow's tears away;
nor let me ever stray
from thee aside.**

(continued...)

4. **When ends life's transient dream,
when death's cold, sullen stream
shall o'er me roll;
blest Savior, then, in love,
fear and distrust remove;
O bear me safe above,
a ransomed soul!**

Words: Ray Palmer, 1830
Music: OLIVET, Lowell Mason, 1831, alt.
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***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

**In life and in death we belong to God.
Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
whom alone we worship and serve.**

**We trust in Jesus Christ,
fully human, fully God.
We trust in God,
whom Jesus called Abba, Father.
We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life.**

**With believers in every time and place,
we rejoice that nothing in life or in death
can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

(from A Brief Statement of Faith, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

**One: So we believe...
All: ...help our unbelief.**

THE LORD'S PRAYER (Traditional)

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come,
thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our
debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.**

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

Thank you, gracious God, for walking with us and providing for us and loving us all along the way. We bring these offerings to you as tokens of our gratitude and symbols of the offering of our lives in thanksgiving to you. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** "Bless Now, O God, the Journey" StF 2191 [Tune 321]

**1. Bless now, O God, the journey
that all your people make,
the path through noise and silence,
the way of give and take.
The trail is found in desert
and winds the mountain 'round,
then leads beside still waters,
the road where faith is found.**

**2. Bless sojourners and pilgrims
who share this winding way,
whose hope burns through the terrors,
whose love sustains the day.
We yearn for holy freedom
while often we are bound.
Together we are seeking
the road where faith is found.**

**3. Divine Eternal Lover,
you meet us on the road.
We wait for lands of promise
where milk and honey flow.
But waiting not for places,
you meet us all around.
Our covenant is written
on roads, as faith is found.**

(next page...)

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Music: AURELIA, Samuel Sebastian Wesley, 1864. *Public Domain.*

***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

One: ...And let the gathered people of God say...
All: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

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