

THE YEARNING TO BELIEVE¹
Mark 9:14-24
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
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The Apostle Paul famously concluded his soaring chapter on love by calling forth the three greatest virtues: faith, hope, and love. And clearly, he said, the greatest of these is love. But too many religious people act as though faith is their chief aim. They think the greatest of these is faith, and they are looking for some infallible doctrine to which they can hitch their life and be safe and secure.

I

On this first Sunday of autumn, 2009, we encounter an ancient scriptural argument over faith. The argument is framed in a story about an unnamed father and his son, who apparently had some form of epilepsy. As depicted in this story, the father is torn between belief and non-belief. He yearned to believe: *Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.*

We can't help but respect the honesty of this father. Because of his love for his sick son, he was willing to expose his pain and his doubt in the midst of a crowd. He had reached a point of desperation where his pain was greater than his embarrassment. His child was exhibiting symptoms

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which in that culture could only be interpreted as demon-possession.

Whenever it seizes him, says the father, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid.

The tragedy is doubled when Jesus encounters what is happening in the crowd around the boy. There was a great debate going on over the boy's health care. When Jesus asks what the debate is all about, the two sides presumably hope that he will come down firmly on their side of the argument. But just as they are waiting for Jesus to speak, there comes an anguished voice from the crowd: *Teacher, I brought my son....* And the anguished father describes the symptoms in his boy and how his last thread of hope had proved to be a failure. His anguish is multiplied by the very arguments about his family's suffering: the helpless disciples and the local scribes were arguing in the very presence of this father over what sin the father must have committed to cause his son to be so ill.

In other words, instead of helping this family, the religious leaders had virtually put the family on trial. No wonder Jesus became angry: *You faithless generation...How much longer must I put up with you?* They were picking theological gnats when the world was in pain around them. They were arguing over orthodoxy when the father was desperate and the boy was having a seizure!

The religious leaders were behaving as if correct doctrine was the important thing. While the boy and his family were suffering, they were arguing over doctrine and forgetting the demands of love. But let us not forget that doctrine supported slavery and apartheid; doctrine has been used to keep women in an inferior place; doctrine has burned many a so-called heretic; and it was religious orthodoxy that would lead the brutality of the Crusades.

But here is a story that turns all our religious and political and doctrinal debate on its ear. Listen to the words of the father: *If you can do anything, have pity on us and help us!* The father speaks for people of every generation when he voices his last shred of hope: *If you can do anything....* In his pleading eyes we see the pleading of many a helpless illness, the imploring questions of those facing bankruptcy; the anguish of the battered wife, the homeless poor, even the plea of the executive who is a victim of downsizing.

Those eyes are not concerned about correct doctrine or ideology; they don't care about political affiliation; they are concerned about survival! When Jesus cracks open the door of hope by saying that *all things are possible for those who believe*, the father is devastatingly honest: *I believe; help my unbelief.* This may be one of the greatest statements of faith in the

entire Bible. Faced with the great issues of life and death, this man is not concerned about looking orthodox; he could care less about impressing Jesus; he is baring his soul and being completely honest.

Jesus could handle such honesty, just the way the living Christ can handle it in us. And without a further word, the healing takes place, and we have this tender scene in which Jesus takes the boy by the hand and lifts him up in the presence of all. Then the boy and his father leave the pages of holy scripture, never to be heard from again. But they do not leave the consciousness of humanity- ever. Their plight is as real and vivid today as it was in the day of Jesus.

II

Before we leave this story, I want to raise another contemporary issue that it illustrates. The disciples were unable to heal the boy afflicted with epilepsy. They had failed. *I asked your disciples to heal him, but they could not.* That is the voice of the father speaking to Jesus.

Sometimes we in the church feel like those disciples. We look around us and see crying needs that we truly want to address, but we cannot seem to make a difference. We cannot seem create the change needed to alleviate the suffering. *I asked your church, but they could not,* seems to be a contemporary accusation.

Can you imagine how powerless, how incapable those disciples must have felt? And when the scribes argued with them, it may be that they were accusing the disciples of meddling in problems without proper credentials. The scribes may have been saying something like, "Look, we have this problem under control. We have a system to care for this boy. You, on the other hand, do not have the knowledge and qualifications necessary to deal with this issue. So you should stop rocking the boat, interfering with our traditions, intruding on our territory, and meddling with our system."

Some people have been told all their lives that they are incapable; they are failures. They are convinced that they aren't smart enough, good enough, rich enough, popular enough, talented enough, important enough to make difference! Some churches are convinced of the same thing. You aren't big enough! You don't have the budget! You aren't what you were in the 50s! You can't! you can't! you can't! And some churches start to believe that!

I want to remind you that in this story Jesus says to the father, *All things are possible to him who believes*. That doesn't mean that we can do anything. Jesus is using a figure of speech. Not ALL things are possible, but SOME things are possible, and likely more things than we can imagine.

When the same story is told in Matthew's gospel, the disciples come to Jesus after the healing and say, *Why could we not cast it out?* And Jesus answers, *If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.*²

He did not say, *If you have faith the size of a mountain, you will say to this mustard seed, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move.* Some churches are convinced that the best they can do is move mustard seeds, when God wants us to move mountains!

Jesus knew how hard it was to have a mountain of faith, but he said that you can get a lot done with mustard seed faith! This desperate father, torn between belief and unbelief, had mustard seed faith! He would never receive the Jerry Falwell award for outstanding orthodoxy. He would never be a candidate for the Robert Schuller prize for being open to a miracle! He was an ordinary man caught in the kaleidoscopic world of shifting values and understandings like our own. He had partial faith; he yearned for deeper faith. He was trying, and that was the best that he could muster.

But it was enough!

² Matthew 17: 18-21.

III

Faith is not believing without proof; it is trusting without reservation. Faith is not anti-intellectual. On the contrary, faith makes good thinking possible. Faith propels the scientist, inspires the poet, drives the scholar, encourages the lonely, and strengthens the fearful. But faith is not the greatest thing! You can do wonderful things, great things, even with faith the size of a mustard seed!

Do you yearn to hear that today? Does this church yearn to hear that today? How much belief is enough to move mountains? It was enough for one person to say: *Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.*