

Columbia, Missouri
The Worship of God • February 20, 2022



The Scripture
Mark 9:14-29

When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. He asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" Someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; 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." He answered them, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me." 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. Jesus asked the father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." Jesus said to him, "If you are able! — All things can be done for the one who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" 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!" 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." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to

stand. When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" He said to them, "This kind can come out only through prayer."

The Message
"Small Victories: A Little Dab'll Do Ya"
Mark Briley

Small victories. Had any this week? Some of you have, and you've told me so. One texted me, "*Turned on my Pandora and Maroon 5 came on. Small victory!*" Another friend sent this word: "*My son got second in his tournament. There were only three kids competing. Small victory!*" Rock on, kid! Another said, "*Someone left out Brownie Bites in the teacher's lounge, and I didn't eat any. Small victory!*" I was hoping to get another one that said: "*I forgot my lunch, and someone left out Brownie Bites in the teacher's lounge. I ate them all. Small victory!*"

I'm just glad you're thinking about the things we share together in this place throughout the week.

Today we consider the most honest line in all of Scripture. Jesus tells a desperate father seeking healing for his son that with faith anything is possible, and the father says, "*I believe. Help my unbelief.*" Most honest line in all of Scripture. And he says it really loud, too... in front of Jesus! He could have stopped at "*I believe!*" That would have been sufficient and impressive enough. He could have shouted, "*100% in, Jesus – you know how I roll.*" He could have held up one of those charts you see in the emergency room that has the ten emoticons to describe your level of pain; 1 = no pain and 10 = excruciating and said, "*My faith is a 1, Jesus, cool, calm and collected*" but he does not. He says, "*Jesus, my faith is about an 8 or 9 right now, but I'm not tapping out yet. Help me!*"

It's a fascinating passage. Jesus is worn out with his disciples and even the gathered crowds. He calls them "*a faithless generation*" and cries out, "*How long do I have to put up with this?*" After Jesus heals the doubting father's son, the disciples say, "*Why couldn't we do it?*" and Jesus says, "*It was a rough demon, guys, one that can only come out through prayer.*"

This passage isn't found in the Common Lectionary. The Common Lectionary is a highly-supported three-year reading plan that covers the major themes of the totality of Scripture. The idea is that in three years' time, if you follow this plan, you will cover all the major points of the Bible. But this story is left out. They don't want to touch it, I suppose. But why? It *is* challenging.

There are lots of things going on – some of it puts Jesus in tough spot – don't see many bumper stickers quoting Jesus that says, "*You faithless generation – how long must I put up with you?!?*" Then you've got the unsuccessful disciples, and if you slant the tone one way you hear them pouting about their inability to do the job: "*Why couldn't we do it?*" And then you've got the abuse of many a Christian preacher who uses this passage as a way of shaming people for not having enough faith. "*If you just had enough faith then she wouldn't have left you. If you just had enough faith, then your gout would go away. If you just had enough faith, then you wouldn't have any money problems.*" That doesn't seem right to me.

So, what do we do with this word from Mark's Gospel? Is there a small victory to be found? Maybe it's about the nature of faith itself... of belief. Author Donald Miller relates to this struggle of faith. He says, "*The goofy thing about Christian faith is that you believe it and don't believe it at the same time. It isn't unlike having an imaginary friend. I believe in Jesus; I believe he is the Son of God, but every time I sit down to explain this to somebody I feel like a palm reader, like somebody who works at a circus, or a kid who is always making things up, or somebody at a Star Trek convention who hasn't figured out the show isn't real.*" ... "Until," he continues, "*When one of my friends becomes a Christian, which happens about every ten years because I am such a sheep about sharing my faith, the experience is euphoric. I see in their eyes the trueness of the story.*"¹ Huh.

I believe. Help my unbelief.

Another woman says referring to her struggle to believe: "*I can't get there. I can't just say it without meaning it. I can't do it. It would be like, say, trying to fall in love with somebody, or trying to convince yourself that your favorite food is pancakes. You don't decide those things, they just happen to you. If God is real, God needs to happen to me.*"² Do you ever feel like her? And then we wonder, "*How do we know it's God stirring in our soul and not heart burn from the spicy Thai food we had eaten the night before.*"

I believe. Help my unbelief.

Or maybe you don't feel like it's you. *You* believe, but you feel like God has moved away from you. The great Disciple preacher, Fred Craddock, tells a story of meeting a minister from Chautauqua, New York, who had no arms. He was born that way. The man told Fred about his experience of learning to put on clothes as a child. He said his mother always dressed him, and he'd gotten to be a pretty big boy. She fed him, she

¹ From *Blue Like Jazz* by Donald Miller. Thomas Nelson Publishing. 2003.

² Ibid.

dressed him, she fed him, she dressed him. One day she put his clothes in the middle of the floor and said, “*Dress yourself.*” He said, “*I can’t dress myself; I don’t have...*” She said, “*You’ll have to dress yourself,*” and she left the room. He said, “*I kicked, I screamed, I kicked, I screamed, I yelled, ‘You don’t love me anymore!’ Finally, I realized that, if I were to get any clothes on, I’d have to get my clothes on.*” After hours of struggle, he got some clothes on. He said, “*It was not until later that I knew my mother was in the next room crying the whole time.*” I don’t know if God distances God’s self from us, but I know sometimes we feel some distance.³

I believe. Help my unbelief.

I’m guessing we’ve all felt this struggle before. “*Where’s God in this mess?*” “*Do I have enough faith?*” Jesus also chimes in elsewhere in the Gospels about faith quantity. “*If you have faith the size of a mustard seed,*” he says, “*you can move mountains.*” Cool. Tried that one? I’m still working on it. Quantifying faith, however, becomes problematic, doesn’t it? A mustard seed faith suggests a small amount should be sufficient. 5%? 10%? What’s the scale?

It was Brylcreem, the men’s hairstyling product that was introduced in 1928 whose tag line said, “*A little dab’ll do ya.*” The advertisement included a cartoon animation of a man whose hair was a mess, but with just a little dab of Brylcreem applied, miraculously, the hair combs and smoothes itself. This worked well until the Beatles came on the scene and inspired a generation to move toward the dry hair look. Faith – a little dab’ll do ya? What about I surrender *all*?

I believe. Help my unbelief.

Maybe it’s not so much a faith quantity issue as it is a matter of faith quality. In his book *Orthodoxy*, G.K. Chesterton says chess players go crazy, not poets. Faith analysis – every measured move – can get you lost in your head. Is that faith? I’m not sure we can explain how Christian faith works. It’s a mystery. I actually love this about Christian spirituality. It cannot be fully explained, and yet it is beautiful and true. It’s something that comes from your soul.

The desperate father approaching Jesus has this sort of faith within his soul. His son has been struggling with a terrible demon his entire life – today, we might consider the demon as a battle of brain chemistry that causes seizures and maybe even bi-polar disorder. If you’ve ever struggled through something difficult with your child or someone you love, you know this pain. It is exhausting and emotionally draining, and sometimes your source of greatest shame – not for their struggle as much as your

³ From *Craddock Stories* by Fred B. Craddock. Chalice Press. 2001.

frustration with it on one hand and the swing of emotion to the other side where you'd willingly take the demon into your own being if it would free them from its grip. The father is exhausted and took his boy to the disciples, who couldn't help him. And then he gets to Jesus and says, "*Rabbi, Teacher, if you can do anything, please.*" Jesus gives him the what-for speech, "*If? If? [I hear Allen Iverson's voice here in Jesus' response⁴] 'You're talking about practice?' 'If I can do anything? You're talking about 'if?'" "There are no 'ifs' among believers."*

And the man could have said anything. He could have blown a gasket. He's carried this pain for more than a decade, and he could have told Jesus what he could do with his anything-is-possible nonsense. But he doesn't. And Mark loves the word, '*immediately*,' uses it all the time in his Gospel – boom – urgency – immediately. An immediate response is generally an honest one. Immediately the man says, "*I've got some faith.*" And while Jesus does say in other places, "*Your faith has healed you,*" he doesn't here. He sees the crowds pushing in and he stands before this boy and says, "*Beat it, demon.*" The boy falls and people are all, "*He's dead. He gone.*" But Jesus picks up the boy, and the young man is good to go. Was this a faith *quantity* issue? Did the dad have *just* enough? Or was it a *quality* of faith issue?

Jesus parts with his inner circle and they're all, "*Why couldn't we do it?*" Were they asking arrogantly? Was it a '*Thanks for showing us up, Jesus?*' What was the tone of their question? Jesus seems to respond with a nod to faith quality. "*This kind of demon can only be cast out with prayer.*"

And what was the demon? The brain chemistry issue in the boy? Or was it the pride of the disciples? I'm not sure. By this point, Jesus has turned his focus toward Jerusalem. The great confrontation was coming. The crucifixion show down was on the horizon and Jesus knew his time was limited. This inner circle would soon be left to carry on the movement. Were they ready? Could they do it? If so, a *quality* of faith to sustain their journey and leadership must surely be humility. Failure comes. It finds us all. Heartache. Pain. Taxes. It comes. It's coming. A humble faith will sustain you through the highs and lows. Embracing that is a small victory because it won't make the news all that often. The 100% faith moments of miracle cures, and car crash survival stories, and once shadowed x-rays now clear make the news, and we can celebrate those. But it's the humble ask in prayer to remove our own demons of pride... *more God, less me...* that hold us through it all.

I believe. Help my unbelief. Small victories.

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eGDBR2L5kzI>



My Uncle Steve was one of my favorites. He was my mom's big brother. Steve had a million-dollar smile and a boisterous laugh that would keep my brother and me up as kids when we spent the night with him and my grandparents. We stayed in the little room next to his at the farmhouse in Iowa, and he'd cackle watching movies late into night. We didn't need to know what he was watching to enjoy it with him.

He always had a classic Cadillac or two that he babied and left a huge wake of dust behind him as he'd travel the graveled back roads of Prescott, Iowa, on his way to work or just for sport. I was an early riser kid though I never beat Uncle Steve downstairs for grandma's famous pancakes. Steve had his stool at the breakfast bar, and I always crawled up in the one next to him before going out to chore with Grandpa. Steve and I would have fork wars to stab the hottest pancake in the stack, and he'd laugh some more and call me a crumb grabber. He was smart. I didn't understand it much as a kid, but you know smart when you see it. He died at the age of 51. The first real loss I knew in my immediate family.



Steve had cerebral palsy. It greatly affected his legs which always made walking a struggle. I've told you part of his story before. **[Steve as child Slide]** Many surgeries as a kid. Tough on a kid with a spirit of adventure like Steve's, and tough on parents who struggled with the constant pain and struggle of their child.

My mother, six years younger, remembers praying for her brother as a child. She grew up in the Methodist church in that little town. She knew the stories of healing. She'd heard this story, "*If you say? Anything is possible for those who believe.*" And she did. And she prayed for Steve to be healed.

But the surgeries kept coming, the braces always being replaced as he grew, the challenges often growing more than shrinking. Mom would wonder if her faith quantity was just too low.

Steve was a hoot in that little farm community – a tight-knit bunch, population a few hundred on a good day. Even on the snowy winter days, when the school bus would park along the gravel road for the Birt kids, my mom would remember the older boys barreling out of the bus and running up the long walk to the farmhouse where they'd greet Steve and carry him to the bus... every day.



My dad, who went to school in that community, remembered Steve coming down the halls every day when he was in high school – it was quite the experience. No elevators in the three-story school building...no codes requiring such in those days. But who needs elevators when you have friends? Dad said, *“I’d hear Steve and the guys coming, and you knew you wouldn’t have much time to get out of the way.”* With a roar of laughter and teenage enthusiasm, Steve would come flying down three flights of stairs to get to the cafeteria carried in the arms of his buddies. Dad remembers countless times when they’d trip and come tumbling down the stairs, but they’d pick Steve up and head right on. Mom remembers the same boys coming to the house to hit the town as teens and literally picking up Steve at the front door and piling him into their car for the night out. And as those teenagers became men, they carried each other still... and when Uncle Steve suddenly passed away, it was those same guys who carried Steve’s casket to the church and to his final earthly resting place just as they had always done.

I spoke with my mom about this story again this week. It’s always been a story that has shaped my heart for people and the gift of having the kind of friends willing to carry you when you need them most. I asked mom about her prayers for her brother and how, if at all, she felt God answered them. Mom wonders if the healing she prayed for came in the spirits of those friends who carried him all those years. What did that act of servant friendship mean for *them*? How did that opportunity shape *their* lives? *Their* faith? She doesn’t believe, nor do I, that God limited Steve’s body to prove some point or grow somebody else but the result... the acts of compassion, the spirit of community and friendship, the humility... speak to a quality of faith that casts out demons of all kinds.

I believe. Help my unbelief.

Maybe that simple, humble, honest statement of belief is quality enough for God to move mountains in our lives that may be immediate or unfold in unexpected ways over

time... even when the mountains may be our very souls. That, my friends, is no small victory.

May it be so.

Song of Focus
“Help My Unbelief”
Words and Music: Ed Varnum

“Blessed are those who grieve.”
Lord, bless me in my grief.
“In waters I am with you.”
But these waters are so deep!
This life’s tossed me all about like winds a leaf.
Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.

This mountain is so high!
This climb just seems too steep.
For now, God, just hold me.
Just hold me as I weep.
Remembering all those times
you brought me strength,
Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.

“As much faith as a mustard seed,”
help me, God, that faith to feed.
To hear your call, that call to heed,
I do believe. I do believe.

“Blessed are those who grieve.”
Lord, bless me in my grief.
“In waters I am with you.”
But these waters are so deep!
This life’s tossed me all about like winds a leaf.
Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.

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