

Mark 9: 20-29
I Believe; Help My Unbelief
Sunday October 14, 2012
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This month our worship topic is Who Was Jesus? Now you might well assume that such a theme is superfluous in a Christian Church. Shouldn't we already have a pretty comprehensive understanding of Jesus? Jesus of Nazareth remains one of the most compelling and confusing people in all of human history. He emerged out of a small village in the north of Israel. He never wrote anything or held public office. He sprang from humble background and was killed while still in his prime. Yet, Jesus changed the world in his 3 decades on this earth. He called 12 men to follow him, and these were not public officials or even the brightest bulbs, but ordinary citizens. He spoke to great crowds on the hillsides of Galilee where the landscape formed natural amphitheatres. He spent his days travelling among the vast peasant population in Israel. Whenever he entered the towns and cities he engaged in debate with the local Jewish leaders. He did not abide by social norms or customs and had a genius for telling stories that demonstrated his provocative points of view. Though he preferred to dwell among the poor and the outcast, he developed a following from people of every class, rank and many professions. His followers included Jews and Gentiles, Romans and Greeks, men and lots of women, which was a curious aspect of his movement which set it apart from other religious movements in any generation.

For all his notoriety, Jesus remains a mystery after all these years. People wonder what made him so special. What made him tick? Why was he drawn to the poor? How did he manage to pray so powerfully? Why was he both so charismatic and kind but also so subversive and difficult? Was he the Messiah? These are questions that most of us will ponder all our lives. We may never answer them completely. But one thing about Jesus that no one disputes was that he had an incredible ability to heal people.

This month we will be considering four different aspects of Christ's personality. Today we will talk about his healings. Whatever people thought about Jesus no one disputed his powers as a healer. When he entered a town and word spread of his whereabouts, people came from miles around bearing their friends and relatives who were sick or ailing. The stories of Jesus' powers over illness were legion. Friends brought a paralytic on a pallet and so certain were they that Jesus could cure him that they tore a section off of the roof where Jesus was staying to lower their paralyzed buddy into the room. A Centurion wanted his daughter healed and believed in Jesus so much that he swallowed any pride of nationality or status to ask for help. Blind men stumbled toward him and lepers screamed from a distance on the off chance he might come nearer. There were more stories about Jesus' powers of healing than anyone in the Jewish tradition ever.

But all those stories have a foreign even primitive ring to them as we listen. From a pre-Enlightenment era, when medicines might include herbal salve or spells and incantations, they strike us as simplistic tales told to the gullible or naïve. They may be allegories but few of us open the Bible when we get sick. Today we have antibiotics and blood work, MRIs and CAT scans when we get sick. We have complex surgical protocols and chemotherapy and radiation. It is hard to understand what these healing stories might really mean to us. So we wonder what it means to us today that Jesus was a healer. Let's look at our story again and see what it teaches us about healing, and what Jesus wants to offer us.

In the first place the story invites you to confront your skepticism.

When the father in our story came to Jesus, he was desperate. The daily grind and exhaustion of caring for his son had worn him to a frazzle. At any moment his son might be in mortal danger. When he was in the middle of his chores the seizure might come and the boy could tumble down an incline, or hurl himself unintentionally into the family cooking fire or lose his balance near a pool of water. These seizures had taken over all their lives. So he tried every doctor, pursued every lead, consulted sorcerers, whatever it took.

In the story we read today the man comes to Jesus and says – Help me if you can. I would like your help if you can do anything”. Jesus hones right in on the doubt in his voice. If you can do anything? Jesus calls him out. In that moment the man acknowledges his doubts.

In this conversation Jesus confronts the man’s skepticism. Now you might wonder why he puts the man on the spot. You might even assume that Jesus was trying to shame the man, or draw attention to his lack of faith in miracles. But I have another theory. I think Jesus highlights this man’s doubts so that the father can acknowledge them. Until you acknowledge your doubts, and say out loud that we are not sure you believe in the power of the living God you cannot begin to seek a deeper faith. Many of us assume that it is a dirty secret if we admit that we don’t really believe these Bible stories. We assume that no one will know if we really don’t believe in miracles. We think God will not be the wiser if we cherish our doubts and hold faith at arm’s length. We think we have to hide doubt or down-play it. We assume that God cannot handle our skepticism. We may even believe that faith and doubt are not compatible. We may believe that faith and doubt are opposites, instead of two sides of the same coin. The story tells us otherwise.

Jesus’ confrontation exposes the man’s doubts. In Christ’s presence his confidence is broken and the man admits out loud, that he is scared. If Jesus cannot make a difference in his son’s life, then what will this father ever pin his hopes on? He wants to hope but hardly dares to – in case his hopes are dashed. In that moment of weakness, and confusion, this man comes clean. He utters one of the truest sentences in the whole Bible. I believe; help my unbelief.

Isn’t that the story of faith at the end of the day? I am trying to believe. Help me.

The help for us comes at the end of the story.

Jesus does heal the boy, and the disciples are curious because they have tried in vain to help the family. They have been trying to heal him, but Jesus says a curious thing to his followers that day. “These kind of healing needs prayer.” I don’t understand this exactly. Didn’t prayer figure in all these stories?

Wasn't that Jesus' primary mode of transformation? I don't pretend to completely understand Christ's meaning here, but he seems to be saying that there is a difference between healing and curing. In the end the healing prayer affected the boy's symptoms and they went away. But, there is a difference between healing and curing. That is my final point.

Finally, there is a difference between a cure and a healing.

If you have a sick family member or if you are sick yourself you may not care about this distinction. You may not care if they are healed. At the end of the day you may be so anxious that you really just want a cure. You may seek some very basic things. You may want to stop worrying so much, stop going to the hospital, stop having so many tests, stop answering everyone's questions about how things are going. You may just really want the pain to stop, or the cells to be normal, or the cancer to vanish. That father in our story just wanted things to be normal. Do whatever you can.

The healing stories of Jesus remind us that Christ is always well aware of any power he has over illness –whether emotional or physical- any power he has is at heart a spiritual power. It may have physical effects, dramatic effects, but it is a spiritual healing grounded in prayer and faith.

Tony Campolo is an Evangelical minister and professor who has written dozens of books about faith – so many that he is invited to speak all over the world. Now one reason Tony is such a popular speaker is that he is down to earth. He is frank in his sermons about his own doubts. Something about his candor makes his faith all the more convincing. One thing he has often expressed is his skepticism about healing. He does not believe he has the ability to heal anyone, though more and more people ask him to try, after one of his inspiring sermons or speeches.

Not long ago, that was exactly what happened. He invited the healing somewhat unintentionally. When he rose to the pulpit of this church he saw oil and thought he should offer to pray for healing with anyone who needed it following the service. Then realizing what he had said, and his own ambivalence he recanted, and allowed as how he had mixed feelings about healing prayer, but he

was willing to try. A woman approached the pulpit with her husband after the service and asked for a prayer. The man had cancer and was very ill. They had tried everything and did not know what else to do. Desperate and sad they prevailed upon Dr. Compolo to say what he could; he could not resist the couple and he prayed with them, asking God to heal the man.

Several months later the woman called him to thank him. She introduced herself as the wife of the man who had had cancer. Tony brightened. "He had cancer? So the prayer worked and he was cured." "No", the woman replied, my husband died. "Then why are you thanking me?" Tony asked. The woman said, "You did not cure my husband, but he was healed. He died of cancer but those last weeks of his life, he was changed entirely. You see, he had been so angry about getting this disease that he was in a rage, and bitterly sarcastic. Even those of us who loved him had trouble being with him. His children were starting to avoid him. But after your prayer, he became the sweet man I used to know. His children came for visits and we laughed together, and shared stories and cried with a level of honesty which had been impossible before. So, though he died eventually, Tony set him free, or the prayer did so that the disease did not have the same grip on him. He was not cured but he **was** healed.

Many of us are afraid of prayer – not because we are skeptical it will not work but because we are afraid it might actually change us in ways we could not imagine or predict. Let us pray- I believe; help my unbelief. Amen