

Pentecost 15B – Proper 19B (9/13/09 – Faith and Prayer)

In the Name JESUS. [Amen]

What a scene Jesus, Peter, James, and John return to when they come down from the Mount of Transfiguration. There is *a great crowd around* the other nine disciples, *and scribes are arguing with them* [Mk 9.24]. (That must have been a real “downer” from the mountain top event Peter, James, and John had just experienced. In short order they went from seeing the glory of the divinity of Christ ... to hearing about His impending death ... to seeing their fellow disciples unable to cast out a demon – something they had done on their missionary journey back in chapter 6.) And as if this weren't enough to bring the reality of their sin-weakened faith crashing down on them, our Lord's words – *O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?* – laid it out in no uncertain terms. They are a *faithless generation*.

O faithless – unbelieving – generation, how long am I to be with you? The Savior asks **us also** today. And in our *Gospel* account of the father with the demon-possessed son, our Lord would teach us the connection between *Faith and Prayer* – namely, that they both depend on Christ!

But let's return to our story for a bit. Jesus and the three Apostles return to a veritable brouhaha – an upset father, upset crowd, arguing scribes, and upset and sadly disappointed disciples. The father just wanted his boy to be dispossessed of the unclean spirit that was literally trying to destroy him [9.22]. It would convulse him and cast him into fire and water. The demon wanted to torment this boy not just for the moment ... but forever ... in hell. The loving, compassionate father, of course, did **not** want that. He wanted his boy whole, healthy, and alive – **both** in this life **and** the life to come. And this father knew just where to go now: to **Jesus**. His faith told him that Jesus would be able to cast out just such a demon. But when he arrives to where he expected to find our Lord, Jesus was gone up the mountain with three of the disciples. Still, there were nine of the disciples there. And they also had cast out demons. They are the Lord's servants – called, appointed, ordained. They will be able to do the job.

Only they couldn't. They should have been able – but were **not**. Now to understand **why** they couldn't, we need to piece together these two words of

our Lord: *O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you?* [9.19] and: *This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.* [9.29] The only conclusion we can reach is that these nine disciples had come to think of their power to cast out demons – power they had exercised before – as their **own**. They didn't begin in prayer – which is to say, they didn't begin from the knowledge that they themselves have no power except that Christ grant it. They didn't recognize their own weak – indeed, impotent – faith. They thought they could do it on their own ... **without** Christ.

Now I doubt they thought that specifically ... in so many words. We do the same thing – in big things and in small. We start out in prayer and faith. But we get used to being the Lord's instruments in His gracious, daily work in our lives ... His instruments as He Himself provides us with daily bread. And soon our proud, sinful flesh comes to think that **we** are achieving these things – our *food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, home, land, animals, money, goods, spouse, children, workers* (or coworkers) ... *good government, good weather, peace, health, self-control, good reputation ... friends ... neighbors* – by our **own** diligent work and power. I am healthy because I eat a good diet and exercise. I am wealthy because I work hard and save. I am wise because I study hard and long. But where is God in all of this? Left out!

That's the problem the disciples were having. And we are just like them – nothing is new under the sun. It is the sinful condition of all mankind – even for the disciples of the Lord ... even for us who are disciples today. At times we remember God – recognize Him as the Source of all our goodness and blessings. At other times we forget altogether ... or nearly so – only giving Him a minor plug in the closing credits for what we have and what we are.

Now if it is the disciples who teach us how we are before Christ in the sinful pride of our weak faith, it is the father – and even his son – who teach us what it is to stand before Christ in right faith. Because the called and ordained servants of Christ were unable to cast out the demon, the father's faith in Jesus was wavering. *But if You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us*, says this desperate, faith-floundering father. To which our Lord responds: *IF You can?!?* He goes right to the heart of the man's problem – his faith: *All things are possible for one who believes* [9.23].

Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “I believe; help my unbelief!” [9.24] This man – like us – is both believer and unbeliever ... both saint and sinner. He is of two minds, as it were. As God’s child, he believes – and wants to keep on believing – God’s promises ... God’s power to heal and save ... God’s grace, love, and compassion.

But like us, this man is still a sinner ... and struggles with unbelief. The spirit is willing but the flesh is oh so weak. Jesus has convicted him of his unbelief while hinting at better things – things that have to do with the Gospel, with grace, and with healing. And then, to strengthen him ... strengthen his weak faith, our Lord graciously casts the demon from his son. You see, in faith this man prays – ***Faith and Prayer*** go together – and the Lord hears ... and acts. ***I believe; help my unbelief.*** In faith – even if it is weak faith – the man confesses and prays for the Lord’s aid. He knows he cannot do it on his own – unlike the disciples who thought they could ... but failed. This man knows the weakness of his faith. He knows that he is not like the One spoken of in ISAIAH [50.4-7] ... the One Who hears and is not rebellious ... the One Who never turns backward in weakness ... but rather gives His back to those who will strike Him ... and His cheeks to those who would pull out His beard to shame Him ... and allows Himself to be spit upon and disgraced – yet sets His face like a flint as He comes down from the Mount of Transfiguration to head toward His Cross. This man knows he is not like the Lord Jesus Christ – so in repentance and faith he prays to the Savior for strength of faith so that he might live and walk in the light, ***trust in the Name of the Lord and rely on his God*** [ISA 50.10].

In fact, it is not even of his own doing that he recognizes his plight – but the work of the Holy Spirit in him through the Word Christ has spoken. Just as it is the Spirit Who moves him to pray ... Who indeed intercedes on his behalf – as the Scripture says: ***Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.*** [ROM 8.26] That way we may know that our prayers are good and righteous before God the Father ... and heard by Him. Likewise the Holy Spirit is at work in us through the Word so that we see the weakness of our faith, repent of our unfaith, and look to Christ for our forgiveness, life, and salvation. Now **we** are the man in the story ... and **we** receive the good works of the Holy Spirit and Christ.

You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again. And 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 arose. [9.25-27]

So it is with you also, dear Christian. Here we see in most vivid manner the dire extent of our weak faith – we’re sometimes like corpses. But in mercy and grace Christ He has come to you who were dead in your trespasses and sins, cast out whatever sin had a stronghold on your life, and raised you up to new life in Him. And in the same mercy and grace Christ **continuously** comes to you whenever you let sin get a stronghold again. Your merciful Savior comes to you today, casts out all that is wrong in you – forgiving you your sins – and He takes you by the hand and lifts you up.

Thus you see once again that it is all Christ! It is Christ Who comes to you ... Christ Who strengthens your faith (even as He is its Author and Perfecter) ... Christ Who works in you to pray – Christ for you ... Christ working in you ... Christ saving you ... Christ raising you up from death to life. It is all by Christ’s compassion ... by His compassionate help. And our faith-driven prayer becomes: *Lord, SINCE YOU CAN DO ALL THINGS, **have compassion on us and help us.*** Or as we prayed in the COLLECT: *Lord Jesus Christ, our Support and Defense in every need, continue to preserve Your Church – and we might clarify: each and every one of her members – in safety, govern her by Your goodness, and bless her with Your peace.*

Indeed, our **Faith and Prayer** can be as firm and sure as that of the Psalmist: *I love the LORD, because He has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy. Because He inclined His ear to me, therefore I will call on Him as long as I live. The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold of me; I suffered distress and anguish. Then I called on the Name of the LORD: "O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul!" Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; our God is merciful. The LORD preserves the simple; when I was brought low, He saved me. Return, O my soul, to your rest; for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you. For You have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling; I will walk before the LORD in the land of the living. [PSA 116.1-9]*

In the Name of the FATHER and of the ✠ SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT. [Amen]