

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Textually, today we have skipped ahead a chapter in the Gospel according to St. Mark, skipping over chapter 8 and into chapter 9. Not that chapter 8 or the first part of chapter 9 are unimportant. In fact, chapter 8 contains Peter's great confession of Jesus as the Christ and Jesus' first passion prediction. And Jesus tells the twelve that anyone who wants truly to be His disciple must "*deny himself and take up his cross and follow [Him]*", that he must "*lose[] his life for [Jesus'] sake and the gospel's [in order to] save it*" (Mark 8:34-35). But we considered that text back in Lent.

And chapter 9 begins with the account of the transfiguration of our Lord. We considered that text back in February. In fact, it's right after that event where we pick things up in chapter 9.

Thus, chronologically too, we have moved ahead. In our Gospel, we have Jesus along with Peter, James, and John, having come down the mountain, coming up to the other disciples in the midst of a crowd. Something big was happening; scribes were arguing with those disciples.

It turns out that a man had brought his son to Jesus to have Him heal him; that is, to have Jesus drive out an unclean spirit that was afflicting the boy. It was doing all sorts of dastardly things to this boy: convulsing him, throwing him to the ground, making him writhe around and foam at the mouth; and oftentimes casting him into fire and into water in order to destroy him.

Of course, Jesus was up on the mountain at the time, so it had been up to the disciples to try to answer the father's plea. And they tried ... they tried to cast the unclean spirit out, but they were not powerful enough. Thus when Jesus came down from the mountain, He did it: "*come out of him and never enter him again,*" Jesus commanded the deaf and dumb spirit. And convulsing the boy one more time, it did.

But the question remained ... it's what the dispute was about: why couldn't those disciples cast out this unclean spirit? After all, only a short time before, Jesus had sent out the disciples, and He had commissioned them for this missionary task. He had given them "*authority over the unclean spirits*" (Mark 6:7). And the disciples returned from that sortie having done it. They had "*cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them*" (Mark 6:13). So what happened this time?

Well, it seems that those disciples had gotten a bit too big for their breeches and thought "we got this." But they didn't. They misunderstood, for it had not been by their own power or authority that they had cast out unclean spirits before. It was by Jesus' power and authority. He had given it to them. Thus, their own impotence was on full display here to the delight of the scribes.

When Jesus showed up, the crowd ran to Him. He asked, “What’s all this commotion?”, and the son’s father answered. “My son has an unclean spirit that afflicts him. *I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able.*”

Sounding a bit exasperated, Jesus called them all a “*faithless generation,*” but He didn’t ignore the father’s plea for mercy. Jesus told him: “*Bring him to me.*” And they did.

And here we see the point of this encounter — that the Lord Jesus might be seen to be God and not we ourselves, as the Psalmist says. “*It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture*” (Ps. 100:3). The Lord wants us to trust in Him and wait on Him and look to Him for all good. He wants us to say with David: “*I trust in you, O LORD; I say, ‘You are my God.’ My times are in your hand; rescue me from the hand of my enemies and from my persecutors! Make your face shine on your servant; save me in your steadfast love!*”

He wants all people to repent of the delusion that “we got this all on our own”; that we’ve got the power and ability and authority to do such good . . . all on our own. It’s rank idolatry. “You shall have no other gods,” the Lord commands. And Luther explains: “We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things” (Small Catechism, 1st Commandment). Moreover, this is what a god is, Luther says: “A god means that from which we are to expect all good and in which we are to take refuge in all distress” (Large Catechism, Part 1, The First Commandment). The disciples thought that they could distribute this good cleansing all on their own, that the man could seek refuge in them. They found out how wrong they were!

The man brought His son to Jesus and begged Him to have compassion and help him. It was a prayer, indeed the prayer of a man of faith — yet not a faith without doubts. “[*I*]f you can do anything,” he prayed. The man didn’t understand the divine power that stood before Him.

“*If you can,*” Jesus repeated — perhaps with a bit more exasperation, but we can’t be sure — and then Jesus exhorted him: just believe. “*All things are possible for one who believes.*” For the mark of a true disciple is faith, and true faith “does not rely on [oneself].” True faith “comes to Jesus” (James Voelz, *Concordia Commentary: Mark 8:27–16:20*, 672), and relies on Him.

And Jesus did not disappoint this father. He healed the son! He commanded the deaf and mute spirit — with divine authority He commanded it — and it obeyed.

Yet, the fact is also that because of the weakness of our flesh, even the faithful suffer from doubts. Lord, “*I believe; help my unbelief,*” the father said, as have believers through the years. Yes, faithful Christians acknowledge their weakness and

come to Jesus for help. Faithful Christians confess their idols — even that inner desire to say, “I got this.” They repent and come to Jesus.

This is the way Dr. Voelz puts it: “a true disciple believes *and therefore* comes to Jesus” — in every need, big or small. Dr. Voelz continues: “But a true disciple also knows that he does not truly believe in the most complete and deepest sense, *and therefore* he comes to Jesus to be helped with that unbelief” (Voelz, 672).

That’s where these disciples went wrong, and all disciples do — they had stopped coming to Jesus; they had stopped praying; they were relying on themselves. And their meager efforts were rebuffed by the unclean spirit. For there is only One who truly has power and authority over such “*spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places*” (Eph. 6:12). It’s He who was foretold of old who would crush the ancient serpent’s head. It’s He whom Isaiah foretold who would “*set [His] face like a flint*” toward Jerusalem (Isa. 50:7), toward Zion, toward Golgotha — and so Jesus did as Luke reports after Jesus’ transfiguration: “*When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem*” (Luke 9:51). The One who wielded this power over deaf and mute spirits is He who “*gave [His] back to those who strike*” and His “*cheeks to those who pull out the beard,*” who “*hid not [His] face from disgrace and spitting*” (Isa. 50:6), who endured the mockery and scorn of the people, and ultimately the shame of the cross, but who by this cross defeated this world’s prince and atoned for the sins of the world.

When we feel strong in the faith, let us come to Jesus and pray to Him acknowledging we don’t have the power, but that His grace is sufficient for us, that in Christ when we are weak, then we are strong with the strength of His might (2 Cor. 12:9-10). And when we feel our weaknesses and doubts, we come to Him still and pray, asking for Him to strengthen our weak faith. “*I believe; help my unbelief.*”

For remember — and we’ve heard it recently — this is the Father’s will for you: that you “*look[] on the Son and believe[] in him,*” that you keep on coming to Jesus, and you will have forgiveness; you will have salvation; you will “*have eternal life, and [He] will raise [you] up on the last day*” (John 6:40).

So come to Jesus, come also today to His table, receive His grace in this Sacrament, believe in Him and in His words, and He will help your unbelief. God grant it ...

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.