

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

Our Gospel lesson begins with Jesus, along with Peter, James, and John, finding the rest of the disciples and joining them. Jesus had taken the three up the mountain with Him, where He was transfigured before them. You remember how that goes: Jesus' divine glory shines forth from Him and through His clothes. As He is talking with Moses and Elijah, Peter offers to put up three tents for them. And a voice from heaven proclaims Jesus to be the beloved Son of God; to Him they should listen. Finally, as they descended the mountain, the disciples were charged to tell no one until after Jesus' death and resurrection.

So they meet back up with Jesus' other disciples. Those others, of course, had stayed below, and in the meantime, a man — a father — had come to them and implored their help. He wanted them to cast out the deaf and mute spirit that was afflicting his son. That wasn't an unreasonable request. After all, Jesus had earlier sent out the disciples, giving them "*authority over the unclean spirits*" (Mark 6:7); and, indeed, they came back from their little missionary trip reporting that "*they cast out many demons*" and healed "*many who were sick*" (Mark 6:13).

However, much to the disappointment of the father, but to the glee of the scribes, who were there to witness it, the disciples were unable to do it. Our text says the scribes were arguing with the disciples — with a bit of scoffing, I can imagine.

That's when the crowd saw Jesus and thronged him with amazement and joy. That's when we learn from the father's own mouth of the affliction of his son. He had an unclean spirit that would make the boy mute; it would seize him, throw him down to the ground, sometimes throwing him into fire or water; it would make him rigid and make him writhe on the ground; it would make him foam at the mouth and grind his teeth. Indeed, when the boy was brought to Jesus, the spirit attacked the boy in just this way, hurling him to the ground.

But after a bit of a conversation with the boy's father, Jesus cast out the unclean spirit and ordered him never to return. The boy was restored. Jesus, true God, did what His disciples could not. And that troubled the disciples, and challenged their faith.

But before that, it challenged the father's faith. Jesus' disciples couldn't help his son. Could Jesus, the father wondered? So the father said to Jesus, "*if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.*"

The disciples' faith, too, was challenged, not only by their inability to cast the unclean spirit out, but also by the scoffing scribes. Jesus would say to both of these, "*O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?*"

We are people of faith, *sola gratia, sola fide* people — by grace alone through faith alone people. We confess it weekly: “*I believe in one God the Father Almighty ... and in one Lord Jesus Christ ... I believe in the Holy Spirit.*” That’s the Nicene Creed; it’s a statement of our faith. We confess it formally too: “*Our churches teach that people ... are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake. ... God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight*” (Augsburg Confession, IV:1-3). That’s the Augsburg Confession. They bear witness — we are faith people.

Yet, how many times has our faith been challenged? By unexpected disaster — like Florence on our Eastern shore? By national tragedies—like 9/11, whose anniversary we just passed? By personal affliction? By shocking and untimely deaths? By disappointment in a fellow believer? By seemingly unanswered prayers—or by a God who takes too long to answer prayers?

It’s in the midst of all of these doubts that Jesus enters into our life and answers our own “*if you can,*” with “*All things are possible for one who believes.*” All things are possible for him who puts his trust in the Lord, who says, “*You are my God,*” who cries out, “*save me in your steadfast love,*” who courageously waits for the Lord (Ps. 31:14, 16).

The father cried out to Jesus in his wavering faith, “*I believe; help my unbelief!*” He had faith, but he had doubts, just like we do. We think, “Lord, I believe, but do I believe enough?” After all, it takes only the faith as little as a mustard seed to be able to move a mountain. Do I have that kind of faith, we wonder? Do I have the faith to cast out demons?

Marge’s and my Beth Ann, who lives with her husband Mark in North Carolina, was telling me about a golf tournament that she played in last weekend — before the hurricane hit. And prior to the tournament, an organizer said a prayer of sorts, rebuking the storm. Is that what our faith is given to do?

I don’t think so. To be sure, faith confesses, but faith is not so much a thing that does, but a thing that receives. Jesus didn’t say to the father, “Here, I’ll strengthen your faith so that you can cast out the unclean spirit yourself.” No, with the father’s cry for mercy, “*Help my unbelief,*” Jesus Himself proceeded to command the unclean spirit to come out of the boy and never enter again. And it did. Jesus didn’t wait until this father’s faith met some high enough threshold of faith before He healed his son. The father’s faith wasn’t the catalyst that released some bottled up energy in God. Jesus did that all on His own; the father, on the other hand, had his faith strengthened as he witnessed the Son of God do what not even His disciples could do.

The same is true for us. Yes, we are faith people. We have been saved by grace through faith, we confess. But, it's important for us to remember, it's not our faith that does but our faith that receives. When Jesus says elsewhere, "*your faith has saved you*" (Luke 7:50), He's talking about this kind of faith, a faith that trusts in Him, in His work, in His words.

For your faith did not atone for sins. Jesus did. The One who "*set [His] face like a flint*" toward Jerusalem (Is. 50:7), toward Zion, toward Golgotha did. The One who "*gave [His] back to those who strike*" did. The One who gave His "*cheeks to those who pull out the beard,*" did. The One who "*hid not [His] face from disgrace and spitting*" did (Is. 50:6). The One who humbled Himself and endured the shame of the cross did. The One who was vindicated by cross and resurrection did. The One whose blood sacrifice propitiated the sins of the world did.

And He did it even though neither His disciples' faith, nor the father's faith, nor your faith were as big as a mustard seed, big enough to move mountains, or big enough to cast out demons. He did it not only to atone for your sins, but also that your faith in Him, who could do such a marvelous thing, might be strengthened. "Lord, help our unbelief."

Moreover, Jesus gives the fruit of what He did in His sacrifice to us in more things that He does, in His sacraments. He does it not because deserve it, because our faith is so strong, but precisely because we who are weak in faith need help in our unbelief. And so He cleanses us by water and His word and gives us salvation; He gives His Holy Spirit and calls us to faith; He invites us to daily contrition and repentance; He forgives us our sins and gives us His righteousness; He feeds us with the meal of His body and blood. And our faith doesn't effect any of this—remember faith is not the doer, but the receiver.

Of course, that's not to say that faith is unimportant; it is. It's essential to acknowledge that Christ has done it all already; our faith is essential to receive His goodness — God's grace, whereby our faith is strengthened; and we are assured of life in Him.

So, thanks be to God, for Jesus who CAN do all things DOES all this freely, without any merit or worthiness in us. With God all things are possible, so yes, He CAN. But more than that, He wills it. He wants to do it. He wants you to be saved. He wants you to live in faith. He wants you to live in the forgiveness of sins. He wants to raise you up on the last day. He wants you to come unto Him when you're weary. He wants you to cry out in your weakness, "*I believe; Lord, help my unbelief.*" He will strengthen your faith and give you rest.

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