

## **Faith and Doubt....How to overcome our unbelief!**

*"Lord, I believe, help me overcome my unbelief!"* MARK 9: 14-32

July 19, 2009

Belief and doubt are often mixed. This man had brought his very sick son to Jesus and his disciples to be healed. This was his last resort. He had tried everything else. When he arrived, Jesus was not there. He, James, John and Peter were still up on the mountain top of the mount of Transfiguration. But fear not the rest of the disciples said. They were tired of being left behind! They were fresh off their success at being sent out as Christ's ambassadors and heralds in the surrounding villages—where they had preached the good news and healed the sick and cast out many demons in Jesus' name. They could handle one sick boy if they were all together...there were, after all, 8 of them!

But things did not go according to plan. The boy did not get up when they prayed for him. A miracle did not happen. He did not stop writhing on the floor, and if anything he got worse! Boy, were their faces red! Following their great adventure and success, this was a real failure.

So Jesus comes back down the mountain to find the crowd all worked up, the disciples confused and embarrassed, and the father despondent. Jesus asks about the boy and as the father tells about his sons affliction, he lets slip his demeanor... "If you can do anything, please help my boy!" "If you can" sounds reasonable after the disciples were unable...But Jesus says "if you can?", with faith all things are possible.

Faith has power, but the faith itself does not heal. It is Jesus who heals and it is not that we have enough faith to be made well. In some of Jesus' miracles the people involved exhibit tremendous faith and in others they don't even know who Jesus is! They have no faith in him at all! The point is, it is Jesus who does the healing, not our faith. It is not

how much faith we have and somehow we have then earned enough points for the miracle of our choice. Remember, Jesus said that if we had a faith the size of a mustard seed, the size of a flake of pepper from a table shaker, we could move mountains...not because we could do it, but because God could do it. it is God who matters, not the amount of our faith.

The man says to Jesus these words that are honest and heartfelt and at the time fearful..."Lord I believe, help me overcome my unbelief!"

It is common to have faith and doubt living simultaneously. We all, from time to time, believe in Christ but have doubts as well. Doubts about life, about faith, about certain aspects of the story, or something. It is an individual thing.

Doubt is different that a differing opinion on a matter of faith. Some people disagree with us and we in our pride might call that doubt, but for them it is not doubt but disagreement. We are so sure we are right that we can't imagine that they would faithfully and intellectually hold to another view! Pride. Some are afraid to express their opinion because all they see or hear on TV is another view, and they begin to see their opinion as doubt...but if they did express it they might find others in agreement. An easy example might be Evolution. Evolution is not a matter of faith or doubt. It can be reconciled with the bible quite easily, if you read the first creation story in Genesis chapter one. there are two creation stories...one in Genesis one, and one in Genesis chapter 2. Genesis chapter one correlates very nicely with the major movements of evolution, and in the story we do not have God actually creating the fish, birds and animals, but having the earth bring forth life..the sea bring forth life...etc. Let the waters team with living creatures, let birds fly above the earth, let the land produce living creatures....

The only creature God creates directly is us...we are made in God's image. So believing evolution is not really doubt, but a different opinion.

But there are times when we truly doubt. We wonder and question, even while we still believe. How do we overcome our unbelief?

Here are some suggestions:

**First, Honesty.** The man is honest with Jesus. He lets it out. He talks about it, he does not hide it. It is important to talk about your doubt with mature Christian friends, a pastor or someone you trust to be non-judgmental...including Jesus. You'll be surprised that you're not alone in your doubts. If I were to ask each person here who could say with the man at one time or another "I believe, help me overcome my unbelief", most of the hands in the room would go up if we were honest.

And God knows our hearts and minds already anyway... we might as well be honest! Before we have a thought or say a word, God already knows it.

We will find we feel so much better and it helps us work through our momentary doubts to be honest with ourselves and with God.

**Second, Trust and Love.**

Remember always that you are loved. That Jesus' love for you is not dependent upon how much faith you have, or anything that you do or don't do. There is nothing you do that will make Jesus love you more, nor anything you can do that will make Jesus love you less! Our doubts do not make Christ reject you or despise you in any way thing ill of you...Jesus loves you with a tender and compassionate love that knows no measure. You are already blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms. And you are loved beyond measure...and it is the hope of the scripture that you will be rooted and established in Love so that you may come to know how deep and wide

and long and high is the unfathomable love of Christ that surpasses all human comprehension!

The more you know this love, and that is has been freely given to you, the more you will trust God. God is trustworthy and will not disappoint. Often our doubt is not intellectual, but is really emotional. It is about being in control and our ability to fully surrender ourselves and our future to God. We are often unable to completely trust God for the things we can not yet see. That is one definition of what faith is...the assurance of that which is not yet seen.

The more experience we have of the love of God in Jesus Christ, the more we can trust God...and the more we will let God lead us...and let our doubts ride. We can learn to say, “ I don’t understand God, and I may never understand, but I trust you. I trust you are loving and good and king, and active and at work—so I loosen my grip, my need to fully know and understand everything and control everything and I trust you for the future, resting in your love.”

Okay, it’s not easy, believe me, I know! Boy, do I know! We often pray that prayer again and again! And then take back control again and again! It is a process, to say the least. But trust comes!

### **Third, it is about surrender...**

We don’t get to tell God what to do. God does not jump through our hoops, to perform these acts or miracles at our demanding...even if we have faith. After Jesus fed the 5000 with the 5 small loaves of bread and three dried fish, the crowd found him again the next day. They wanted another sign...holding their faith hostage as it were. We will believe and follow you if you perform another miracle for us to really prove you are the messiah! This time they had one that they asked for. yesterday you fed us dinner and that was really cool! Today we would like to order Manna from heaven. We have heard about it in Sunday School our whole lives and we would like to have it too...where God feeds us morning and night the mysterious bread from heaven every day...no need to work again. Then we will follow you.

But when God gave the children of Israel Manna, they always wanted something else...they continually complained and demanded more and more and more.

God has already given so much...we are made in his image. And he has redeemed us with a great price, he has loved us so much. He has lavished his amazing grace upon us...in sending his beloved son Jesus as the ultimate act of Love and mercy, that we (the whole world) might be saved. In him we are transformed by love and grace into new creatures, forever renewed and recreated in his image...and yet we often want God to prove himself some more! Just this once we say...show yourself! Paint the sky just for me! Can we stop a moment and see what we are asking of the one who created the universe and set the galaxies spinning...and yet became a baby and walked among us and taught and preached and healed...and died and rose again that we might live...and lives on within us in his Holy Spirit...we demand more and more and more...just this once...

We need to look at What Jesus has done, what he has done for me, for you, for us all, and what he is doing within me and you even now. He is at work always. He is not silent and he is not inactive...his Spirit is working even now. He is working in you...just look for it, ask him to show it to you. But don't demand he show you some sign of your choosing! Ask Him to show you what he is already doing in your life...and how he is working around you....and you will be amazed!

#### **Fourth: Keep our perspective.**

There is much we do believe. There is much we know in our hearts and minds and lives to be true. We need to remember what God has done for us. Salvation history builds faith. The litany of God's mighty acts of salvation...both collectively and personally, helps build our faith as a people and as an individual. It is why they are listed so often throughout the Bible.

In the midst of struggle, or hardship or difficulty we become terribly near sighted. All we can see is what is right In front of us right

now...the mortgage, the loss of the job, the financial melt down, whatever the crisis is at the moment. And it can be overwhelming. Our options seem limited and we can be filled with doubt and despair, especially if all we see in our field of vision is the crisis.

I was reminded of this this week in a big way. An old friend and I had lunch and during our visit I learned that he was laid off from his job, the second one in two years. As we talked, he asked me about my struggle with pain and asked if I ever thought of giving up. I said never. That God's strength was made real in my weakness and that people could hopefully see my faith was real in the midst of this struggle. He said he meant really give up, as in end it all. I was taken aback and said no, I couldn't do that to my family. As we talked, warning lights went off and it became clear that he was thinking seriously about suicide. We talked it over directly and averted the crisis and we are meeting again after I get back from vacation and I am getting him more help...

But one of the issues was that his perspective was all off. He said it was logical. I reminded him he was in the dungeon of depression, and all the windows down there were really mirrors...and all the options he could see were really depressed options. While he was convinced it made logical sense, it was only logical to someone depressed, and if he were not depressed, many other options would open up to him. He agreed to explore those options with me...his coming to me was a cry for help and an expression of a deep desire to not hurt himself.

We need to lift our eyes, to lift our heads up in the midst of struggle...the psalms says

*"I lift my eyes to the hills---where does my help come from?  
My help comes from the Lord, the maker of Heaven and Earth.  
He will not let your foot slip---he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep."* (Psalm 121: 1-4)

We need to remember that God has brought us through hard times before, and God will do so again. And through it all, he is with us. He will never leave us nor forsake us.

### **Fifth: COMMUNITY**

Finally, we need each other. This brings us full circle. Back to the first point. We need the church. We need to be together as the Body of Christ, worshiping, studying, serving, living out our faith...it is here that Christ is present and that we gain strength of faith and where our understanding grows. We need one another. it is here that we support one another...:

“So that the Body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”  
(Ephesians 4: 13)

And

“ Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is Christ . From him the whole body, joined together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” (Ephesians 4: 15-16)

Together we support one another in our belief and in our doubts, we speak the truth in love, and we grow together into the maturity of the whole measure of the fullness of Christ...becoming more and more like Jesus. It is about following more than believing...about doing...

Lord, I believe, help my unbelief. God has given me you, and you me to help with our unbelief. This is a great gift. Thank you.

Amen.