

Sermon Preached at Grace Community Church (EPC)  
Sun City Grand, Surprise, AZ  
Sunday, January 26, 2014  
by the Reverend Cooper McWhirter

*"I Do Believe...Help My Unbelief!"*

Mark 9:14-24

Recently, Sammie and I had an opportunity to observe our youngest grandson, my namesake, William Cooper Moberly, whom we affectionately call "*Mini-Cooper*"! For those two weeks we saw this seventeen month old curiosity, mischievousness and daring exploits. For Mini-Cooper each new day is a day of discovery. But this little tike taught me an important lesson, too! His antics taught me a lesson about trusting God; one which no scholarly works, or philosophical platitudes could possibly have done.

In the 1930's the Reverend Daniel Considine wrote: "Never was a mother so blind to the faults of her child as our Lord is towards His own children." Therefore, we should never become discouraged by our faults...A little child who is learning to walk is not astonished at stumbling and falling with each step taken...And neither should we!"<sup>1</sup>

All too often one's walk of faith involves taking one step forward and two steps backwards! Disappointment and disillusionment inevitably follows those whose faith is fragile. Such was the case recorded here in Mark chapter 9. And although this same episode appears in both Matthew and Luke's gospel [Matthew 17:14-19; Luke 9:37-42]; neither of these narratives recite the dialogue between this forlorn father and Jesus.

I believe this heartfelt exchange accurately depicts the spiritual condition for many of us who earnestly seek God's love and affirmation. Our passage begins with this acknowledgment: THIS FATHER DID HAVE FAITH IN GOD (repeat).

A crowd had gathered around Jesus' disciples when an argument ensued between the disciples and some scribes. When Jesus arrived He asked what all the commotion was about and someone in the crowd said: "***'Teacher, I brought You my son, possessed with a spirit which makes him mute; and whenever it seizes him, it slams him to the ground and he foams at the mouth, and grinds his teeth and***

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<sup>1</sup> Brennan Manning, *Ruthless Trust* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000) pg. 20.

***stiffens out. I told Your disciples to cast it out, and they could not do it' "*** [Mark 9:17-18].

Now before we scrutinize this man's faith, it's important for us to understand the spiritual malaise that was so prevalent among the Jews at that time. It had been 400 years since the last the Old Testament prophet, Malachi, had prophesied. During this Inter-Testamental period no prophetic word was spoken; nor were any miracles performed.

Then, too, this encounter occurred soon after the "*Transfiguration of Christ*" in which Peter, James and John saw with their own eyes the glorified Christ standing beside the figures of Moses and Elijah. Yet, even after this momentous occasion they, along with their fellow disciples, were unable to heal this man's son.

Notice what this father said: "***Teacher, I brought YOU my son...***" By the mere fact he brought his son to Jesus' disciples, was essentially the same as if he had brought his son before Jesus Himself! In other words, this father did have faith in God; for why else would he have done so? This man's faith was further substantiated where in verse 18 he exclaimed: "***I told your disciples to cast it out, and they could not do it.***"

And what was Jesus' response? "***He answered them and said, 'O unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him to Me!' [And] They brought the boy to Him.***" Jesus was not accusing this father of having a lack of faith, for He used the third person plural "*them*". No! Jesus reprimanded *all* who were present there that day, including the scribes and especially His own disciples!

Oh yes, this father had faith in God, but that in itself is NOT a commendation! James, the half-brother of Jesus wrote: "***You believe that God is One. You do well; for even the demons believe that and shudder***" [James 2:19].

**BUT WHAT THIS FATHER DID LACK WAS TRUST IN WHAT GOD COULD DO (repeat).**

In his book, *Ruthless Trust*, the late Brennan Manning writes: "Faith, as in biblical faith, lies in trusting God...It is one thing for a person to say, 'I have faith in the existence of God' but one cannot say, 'In my heart God exists,' until I have said, 'I trust YOU!' " <sup>2</sup> Paul Tillich, a 20<sup>th</sup> century existentialist

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<sup>2</sup> Brennan Manning, *Ruthless Trust* pg. 6.

theologian and philosopher, defined *trust* as “the courage to accept acceptance.”

When the boy was brought before Jesus, the evil spirit immediately recognized the Lord and it threw the boy into violent convulsions. Jesus asked the father how long his son had been this way and the father replied: “*From childhood.*” Whereupon the father pleaded in anguish: “*But if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!*” With perhaps a look of astonishment Jesus retorted: “*If You can? All things are possible to him who believes.*” And immediately the boy’s father cried out: “*I do believe; help my unbelief.*”

Dear ones, no truer words were ever spoken by a mere mortal in the presence of God! Jesus doesn’t want, or need *our* pity! Rather, Jesus takes pity on us for our lack of faith! But He doesn’t leave us there. The Lord offers us a sure remedy for whatever ails us...our lack of trust in *Him* and what He is able to do! But this requires an unequivocal and undeniable admittance of our need to trust God solely and completely...regardless of our circumstances!

C. S. Lewis quips: “The Bible gives us one short prayer which is suitable for all who struggle with their beliefs and doctrines.”<sup>3</sup> He then quotes this father’s plea: “*I do believe; help my unbelief.*”

Now this is only my opinion, but I believe this father was being brutally honest with both himself and with God. And for this reason alone, this father should be commended! Brennan Manning, who in life was no stranger to affliction and addiction, made this comment: “To knife through our pretense, cowardice and evasions, to see the truth about ourselves and the true state of our souls before God...requires enormous courage and ruthless trust in the merciful love of the redeeming God...sin must be acknowledged and confessed *before* there can be forgiveness and real transformation.”<sup>4</sup>

But knowing what takes place next with the healing of this boy neither absolves us of our culpability, nor does it resolve our own afflictions: FOR WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH YOU AND WITH ME? (repeat).

Brennan Manning used this equation to help us better understand what is meant by trust: Faith + Hope = TRUST

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<sup>3</sup> Wayne Martindale and Jerry Root, Editors *The Quotable Lewis* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1990) pg. 208.

<sup>4</sup> Brennan Manning, *Ruthless Trust* pg. 171.

Although we often use faith and trust interchangeably, there is a distinction between these two words. It's been said that hope is reliance on the promises of Jesus, which is then accompanied by faith which is the expectation of fulfillment. In other words, faith *plus* hope equals an undiluted trust.<sup>5</sup>

But then Manning goes on to explain their similarities: "Like faith and hope, trust cannot be self-generated. I cannot simply *will* myself to trust. What an outrageous irony," Manning writes, "the one thing that I am responsible for throughout my life I cannot generate. The one thing I *need* to do I *cannot* do on my own. But such is the meaning of 'radical dependence'. What does lie within my power is to pay attention to the faithfulness of Jesus. That's what I am asked to do...to pay attention to Jesus throughout my journey..."<sup>6</sup>

Jesus loves us in spite of us. He sees us as we are, but He also sees us as we shall be! There is nothing any of us can do to increase His love for us; just as there is nothing we can do to diminish it.

One of the most remarkable words in the Bible is where Jesus says, "*I call you My friend*" [John 15:15]. Commenting on these words, St. Augustine wrote: "A friend is someone who knows everything about you and totally accepts you as you are."

I pose the following questions to all who consider themselves unworthy of God's love: "Why was Jesus attracted to the unattractive?" "Why did He desire the undesirable and love the unlovable?" "Why did He come alongside the impoverished, the social outcast, the 'down and outers'?"

The answer is simple, but oh so profound. Jesus embraces us within the '*shadow of His wings*' with heartfelt compassion on all who dare to approach Him with complete humility and honesty.

Clearly, growth in trust cannot be self-initiated. The one thing most needed cannot be self-supplied. But there is one abundant source of trust to which we must return again and again. It flows from the barren rock of Golgotha at the feet of the crucified Christ.<sup>7</sup>

So why is it important for us to trust in God? I will tell you. It is because trust is the preeminent expression of...LOVE. Thus, when we say to

<sup>5</sup> Brennan Manning, *Ruthless Trust* pg. 86.

<sup>6</sup> Brennan Manning, *Ruthless Trust* pg. 96+.

<sup>7</sup> Brennan Manning, *Ruthless Trust* pg. 180.

our Lord, "*I trust You,*" it is as if we are saying, "*I love You.*" Yes, I love You, Lord! Why? Because I now place my trust in YOU and You alone!

Let us pray...