



VILLAGE
CHURCH
Presbyterian (USA)

We Believe. Help Our Unbelief.

SCRIPTURE:
Mark 9:14-29

October 1, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

A daddy brings his son to Jesus. It's his last hope. "Can you heal my son?" I suppose any father would do the same, but it's still a courageous thing to do. It takes courage to hope that what has gone wrong can be made right. "Can you help my son?" Jesus says, "Of course, if you believe." To which the father replies, "I believe, help my unbelief."

As you well know, I love this prayer. We end every sermon with this simple, five-word prayer. "We believe, help our unbelief." I don't remember when I started saying this prayer, but it's been most of my ministry. And I have needed this prayer in different ways over my lifetime. I know that there are some people for whom unbelief, or doubt, is a sign of weakness. Doubt is to be swallowed up by belief. Even if you have questions or don't understand, "just believe," they say.

David Lamott is a singer/songwriter. He sings of a moment in his childhood when he watched the movie "Peter Pan" and learned that if you only believed, you could fly. With enough faith to move mountains, Lamott climbed on the roof of his house and launched himself over his backyard. And he flew... straight into the ground and broke his collarbone.

We can believe anything; it doesn't make it reality. Christian faith does not call us to believe in what is not real, not true. Quite the opposite. But still, believing what is true can be challenging. Which is why for me, faith and doubt have always lived in close proximity.

Frederick Buechner blessed this view of doubt. He once wrote, "Doubts are the ants in the pants

of faith. They keep it awake and moving."¹ For Buechner, doubt, or unbelief, is that little question that lives in the back room of our mind—that raised hand at the end of the lecture, that look of skepticism in the soul. The "I'm not so sure about that" mental space.

I imagine you know what Buechner is talking about. There are those questions that rise up either from thought or from the circumstances of our lives that cause us to wonder about the veracity of the faith we claim. They send us back to the books, back to the drawing board, to think again, think deeper, think anew about the claims of our faith. In that sense, Buechner is right: doubt is the 'ants in the pants' of faith.

Do you believe the scriptures are the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ? That's the ordination question in the Presbyterian Church. Or, do you believe scripture is inerrant? That's a doctrinal decision. Do you believe that God has a purpose for human life or is it all an accident? That's a doctrinal decision. Do you believe in the resurrection? Or does death have the final word? What do you believe? Our belief system is what we call our doctrine.

Doctrine sounds like a fancy word, but doctrine is simply the conversation Christians have had through the generations expressing what we believe. I think this conversation is important. But if I understand this text, the question put to this father is not a question of doctrine; it's deeper than that. And no offense to Buechner, but I think he missed it a bit here.

A father brought his son to Jesus and pleaded, "Can you make this right? Can you heal my son? Can you mend what has gone wrong in our

1 Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (1973) p. 20.

lives?” That is the question of faith. Can God make right that which is broken? Can God redeem that which is sinful?

And Jesus says, “Yes, if you believe.” “I believe, help my unbelief,” he says. I believe, except when I don’t. I trust you, but I know how hard making things right really is. I believe, but I have been disappointed so many times.

You see, the challenge of faith is that it is not about little things. Jesus is asking him to trust something so big it is impossible to trust without some wonder, without some uncertainty.

Jesus spoke of the promised day of God. A day when justice will roll down like waters. A day when swords will be beaten into plowshares. A day when the sin in you and me will be washed away and we will not be defined by the evil in the world but by the goodness in God. But in the face of the world’s disappointments, to hold fast to this vision of God’s promised day is not something that we hold with certainty but with trust and hope. And that kind of hope takes courage.

When my mother was in her mid-50s she had a cerebral bleed and it left her disabled. Even before Carol and I had children, we were taking care of my mother. A few years after her stroke, she started having seizures. They couldn’t get the seizures under control. She took a fist-full of pills every day, but the seizures were relentless. My mother’s sister, who lived in upstate New York, called one afternoon and said, “Tom, I think I have found some people who can help your mother with her seizures. It’s an alternative treatment,” she said. There were people who would put their hands on my mother—a laying on of hands—and they would do it all day for several days. And my aunt said, “They have had success with seizures. Can you send your mom to me for this treatment?”

You may think I am a horrible son, but it sounded crazy to me. I had been to so many doctors and faced disappointment so many times, I couldn’t put hope in some alternative treatment. I told my aunt, “If you want to take her there I am fine with that, but don’t ask me to hope

again. I can’t be the cheerleader on this.” I had been schooled by disappointment and I didn’t have it in me to hope. Hope takes courage.

Well, my mother went and I can’t explain it but she hasn’t had a seizure since. And I am profoundly grateful but to hope that would be the case required more courage than I had at the time. If I understand the text, that is what this passage is about.

The reason faith and doubt, belief and unbelief, are partners is because Jesus is asking us to trust that God can make things right so the size of this faith is huge. We are not asked to simply believe that we go to heaven; we are asked to believe that heaven can come to us. We are not asked to believe that we can be ourselves; we are asked to believe that we can be like Jesus. We are not asked to believe that our lives can have meaning; we are asked to believe that all that has gone wrong can be made right.

It is one thing to trust that God can do this, but it’s another thing to claim that we are certain. For me, this faith is too big to squeeze down into certainty, so I pray all the time, “I believe, help my unbelief.” I choose to live in that space, rather than to reduce the ways of God down to something I can be certain about.

I read about Dr. Matthew Sleeth.² He is a medical doctor and served as Chief of Staff at a New England hospital. He and his wife, Nancy, escaped the gray days of New England and sought a vacation in the sands of Florida. He said it was there, sitting on the porch watching the evening surf, when Nancy asked him, “What is the greatest problem facing the world?” He said he thought about it. What would you say? Poverty? War? The father in our scripture reading would say disease. After some thought, Sleeth said, “The earth is dying.” She asked, “Then what are we going to do about it?”

He could not leave this conversation on vacation. It launched Dr. Sleeth on a spiritual journey. He claimed or reclaimed Christianity. He said he found in Christianity a calling and a grace that empowered him to face environmen-

2 “The Power of a Green God”, J. Matthew Sleeth, M.C., *The Green Bible* (2008) p. i-17.

tal destruction with courage and a commitment to do something about it and perhaps most importantly, a hope that would not let him rest.

I think that is what it means to be Christian. To let our hope be defined not by the disappointments that life brings us, but by the hope that Christ brings us.

The love of Jesus Christ invites us to see the world not only as it is, but as the power of God's redemptive love would make it. But as soon as we imagine the world shaped by the redemptive

love of God, there we are, believing in something so big, so grand it is impossible to hold apart from some wonder, some question, even some doubt.

That doubt is not a sign that your faith is weak; it is the confirmation that your hopes are finally big enough. So we step out in faith, we lean into that holy promise and as we do we pray, "We believe, help our unbelief."

Would you say it with me? We believe; help our unbelief.