



One Day Closer

TEXT
Mark 9:14-29

November 3, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

This moment in Jesus' ministry is shaped by the same thing that shaped every moment: the kingdom of God. I don't use that term as often, but the kingdom of God is what I mean when I speak of God's promised day.

I don't know what you think about when you think of God's promised day. Maybe you think of the food pantry having a real slow day because we have finally figured out how to share enough, so that everyone has enough. Maybe you think of casting off some old regrets and moving into a new day of grace. Maybe you think of those tender places in your heart, battered by grief or disappointment, being comforted with a love that makes the pain almost impossible to remember.

I don't know what you think of, but Jesus said God intends us to live together defined by love. Of course we spend most of our lives missing that purpose, but in the end, everything that has gone wrong will be made right. That's God's promised day.

Do you trust God to come through on that? It's big. I base my life on that promise. I want it to shape everything in my life, but it's a big promise. It's so big,

it's not one I can hold on to with certainty. It requires trust.

I'll come back to that.

You are here. That makes you pretty special — maybe even unusual. The Pew Research Center is reporting something we need no experts to tell us, and that is that fewer and fewer Americans identify as Christian. Those who claim to be Christian have declined by 12 percent over the past decade, and among young adults, just less than half claim to be Christian. Perhaps just as significant, those who do claim to be Christian are "less observant," Pew says. They worship less.¹

We sense this reality in our denomination, as every year the Presbyterian world grows smaller and smaller. Indeed, the last time the Presbyterian Church showed a net growth in membership, Lyndon Johnson was President.

Our presbytery includes the Presbyterian congregations within about an hour's drive in any direction from here. In the last six years, Heartland Presbytery has declined from 100 congregations to 82, and we have lost 25 percent of our membership as a presbytery in six years. Most of these congregations are small, with half

having 50 members or less. They care for each other and seek to be faithful, but it's hard. In most contexts these days, it's pretty difficult to be a church when membership is small. So, I anticipate the downward trend in membership will continue. While that is not our story here at Village, it is the story of most churches in the country. Fewer and fewer folks think the church is important.

So, the fact that you are here makes you rather unusual these days.

There are loads of studies that look to those outside and ask, "What's going on with them?" That's an important question. But I find the more interesting conversation to be not about them, but about us. And I wonder if the problem is increasingly our neighbors look to the church and ask what difference it makes. I wonder if the church has made faith too small. The ministry of Jesus was about the big things in life

A desperate father brings his ailing son to Jesus. "Can you help my son?" He brings not only his son; he brings his whole life, his whole world. "Can you make us better?"

Jesus says, "All things are possible for him who believes."

All things are possible? This appears to be dishonest. All things? We know that's not true. Peter Pan says you can fly if you believe; well, you can try that if you wish, but I wouldn't recommend jumping off the roof. It's not going to end well — belief or not.

All things are possible? No.

In this moment, like every moment, what Jesus is talking about is the kingdom of God — the promised day of God. Jesus is promising that his life can show up in us, if we believe.

When Jesus asks, "Do you believe?" it's not a theology test. It's not "Do you believe certain things about Jesus?" It's much bigger than that. He is asking if we trust him with our lives.

The Greek word translated "believe" is *pisteuo*. It's better translated "trust." Belief sounds like an intellectual thing, doesn't it? I can believe forgiveness is a good thing. But if I trust it, I forgive. What I believe influences my thoughts; what I trust influences my choices; it shows up in my life. Jesus is asking, "Do you trust me with your life?"

To which the father says, "I believe; help my unbelief." He says this because he realizes this is not about little things. Jesus is asking him to trust that his life can be different, that the way things have always been doesn't have to be the way things will always be. Jesus is not asking to trust that people can be kind. He is not asking to trust that there will be goodness in life. He is not asking to trust that we can survive our mistakes.

He is asking us to trust that God will bring life from death; that God can change us; that the love of God can heal that which is broken in us and in the world. He is asking not only to trust that tomorrow can be different than yesterday, but to live today like we know it to be true.

This gospel of Jesus is big — too big to trust without some wonder. It's too big to squeeze down into certainty. It's not something we know; it's something we trust. That's why this father prays, "I believe; help my unbelief." I wonder if a belief that is so big it requires unbelief is lacking in the church.

The same people in the Pew Study who say they are not Christian, that they don't want to have anything to do with the church, most of those folks, when asked what the church is about, they say it's pretty simple. The church has forfeited its moral authority because the church judges people and seems to delight in pointing out the failure of others. The church excels in being exclusive, particularly in the condemnation of the LGBT community. It's more self-righteous than loving. That's what they say.

Now, I hope you know that I am not pointing my finger at you because you are not like this at all. The problem is when folks think of Christian faith in America, they don't think about you. They think about Joel Osteen and Pat Robertson and James Dobson and Franklin Graham, and when they listen to those guys, they make God sound small.

That's why I think it's more important than ever for Village to be Village. From our first moments over 70 years ago, Village has offered a witness to Jesus Christ that would cause us to pray, "We believe; help our unbelief" — because we refuse to reduce the promise of the gospel, and we refuse to ignore the calling of the gospel. Let me give you two examples.

The first is, we will walk our faith. Last Sunday, Desiree Monize from Avenue of Life came and thanked you for supporting the work of eliminating homelessness among students in Wyandotte County. I am convinced that in God's promised day, there won't be any of God's children who lack a home. And if that is true, then today we need to work to address that problem and move us one day closer to that promised day.

Two weeks ago, Tom Esselman from Front Porch Alliance came to thank you for 20 years of staying in the Ivanhoe neighborhood. Front Porch is more than a program or an idea; it's a commitment to relationships. Will this heal the divisions in our city? No, but God has promised a day will come when we will all see one another as family, and while I can't see that day yet, I think Front Porch is helping us move one day closer.

A few weeks ago, we lifted up the meaningful work you are doing around the world — in Kenya and in the Dominican Republic, in Haiti and at the US/Mexico border.

The point I am making is that every week we try to live

in a way that displays our trust in God's promised day. You walk your faith. For we know that anything that erodes human flourishing, anything that diminishes human life, is not consistent with the promised day of God. So, we commit ourselves to live toward that day.

But there's a second thing. We not only walk our faith, we talk our faith. There are serious problems in our world. Scientists reported this week that the Arctic is warming twice as fast as the rest of the planet, contributing to ocean rise, reef bleaching and more intense weather. We are watching California endure their new normal as almost 9 million acres burned in 2018, and who knows the number this year.

Suicide is increasing both among youth and among military, as the stresses of life are overwhelming to many.

And last year (2018), there were 135 murders in Kansas City, and of those, 125 were committed with a gun.

Our culture needs a new conversation. We are polarized and seem to celebrate division. The binary approach is saying, for example, we either support the Second Amendment on one side or we take everyone's guns away on the other. That kind of binary conversation is handcuffing us to the status quo, and people are paying for it with their lives. We need a new conversation, and we can do that here.

America has divided herself left and right and talks as if our side is holy and the other side

is either stupid or evil. Many have embraced an attack on facts and choose to say anything that sounds good, whether there is any basis in reality or not. And this binary approach to everything is destructive. It is breaking down the institutions that allow us to live with one another; and in the things that matter, it makes us weaker every day.

We need a new way of talking, and I think Village is a place for that. Here we are willing to talk about anything — not in a spirit of certainty, but with a spirit of conviction and humility. Here we are willing to learn from one another.

I believe if you are talking about it out there, we ought to talk about it in here. If you are concerned about it in the world, we ought to talk about it in here. We need a new way of conversation. Our faith calls us to talk about the things that matter in truth and in love.

I don't know what you think about when you think about the promised day of God. Maybe you think of justice rolling down like waters like Amos did. Maybe you think of swords being beaten into plowshares like Isaiah did. Maybe you think of the poor being filled with good things like Mary did. Maybe you think of all God's children finding their place at the feasting table, where there is room for all and enough for everyone.

Jesus said that day is coming ... so today we pray, "We believe; help our unbelief," and we do what we can to move one day closer.

You are pretty unusual, you know. That's why being here matters. And it's why your pledge and generosity matters, because we aren't just playing church; we are living toward God's promised day. And I don't know, but I think if folks saw faith like that, they would be drawn to it.

¹Nicholas Kirstof, "Less and Less a Christian Nation," *The New York Times*, October 27, 2019

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.