

3 May 2020

Matthew 6:9-15, Mark  
9:14-29

Faithful Presence:  
Practice through Prayer  
First Mennonite Church

“Why could we not  
cast it out?”

The Gospel reading  
from Mark informs  
us that the disciples  
of Jesus were not  
able to cast out an  
unclean spirit from  
the body of a boy.

“Why could we not  
cast it out?”



I suspect the disciples' question is more than an academic question. Up to this point in Mark's gospel, the disciples had enjoyed great success in Jesus' name. Earlier in Mark, Jesus *called the twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over the unclean spirits (Mark 6:7)*. They had journeyed about the country, working wonders much like their master, returning to tell him of their accomplishments. But here in this story, they failed. More than that, they failed in front of the Scribes, many of whom hadn't been warm to Jesus' mission, of which they were a part. If failing in front of your critics wasn't embarrassing enough, a crowd gathered to watch their public failure. The disciples failed. Miserably and publicly.

“Why could we not cast it out?”

This is not an academic question; it is a heartfelt, painful, perhaps stomach-wrenching question. Why did we fail? To which Jesus answers, *“This kind can come out only through prayer.”*

Why does Jesus say this? Did the disciples not pray before this encounter with the man and his ill son? I always assumed they had prayed, but maybe they

hadn't. Come to think of it, nowhere in today's reading does it say Jesus prayed either.

So, why does Jesus say, *"This kind can come out only through prayer."*

I wonder whether prayer isn't connected with the bigger question of faith. Let me explain.

In the previous story in Mark, Jesus and three disciples (Peter, James and John) went up a mountain. While the other disciples waited for them to return, a man brought his son to them, wanting him healed. (This is just an aside, but the symptoms described in Mark sound like epilepsy.) This event naturally drew a crowd, much like a crowd is drawn to a traffic accident or burning building. The crowd included a group of Scribes.

With previous success under their belts I imagine these disciples felt some confidence in their skills and abilities. They had learnt the techniques. Earlier *they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them (Mark 6:30)*. They had done it before so what was stopping them from doing it again? And what an opportune time to demonstrate God's power? Surely some well-chosen words, a few incantations and formulas ought to get the job done! A healing would impress the gathered crowds, silence those pesky Scribes, and raise their profile and status in God's Kingdom. Healing this boy would certainly put them in a better position to get that coveted "who-is-the-greatest" title, an argument the disciples had almost immediately following this story (Mark 9:33-37).

Except the techniques, the incantations and formulaic words and potions didn't work. "Why could we not cast it out?"

Jesus arrived in the middle of an argument between the defensive disciples who failed to heal the boy, a distraught father, a large crowd, and the Scribes who saw the disciples' failure as fuel to discredit Jesus' authority.

Jesus is frustrated with the Scribes for drawing his disciples into an argument over his authority, exasperated with the uncomprehending crowd, upset seeing the destructive power of evil in the helpless boy, and angry with his disciples who can't get it through their heads that God's kingdom will not come about by scrupulously following the rules like the Pharisees and so many Christians today believe, nor by getting all the answers right on the catechism exam, nor by

adopting the latest evangelistic techniques, nor by saying the right words in a formulaic sequence. No. None of these things will bring about God's kingdom.

Too often the Church sentimentalizes Jesus, reworking him into Jesus our good friend, our buddy, our therapist who always affirms and never criticizes, always soothes and never yells. Yet here in Mark, we encounter a different Jesus. In frustration, Jesus yells at all of them, *you faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you?* (Mark 7:19)

The father, desperate to have his son healed utters one of the most human confessions in the Bible—*I believe; help my unbelief* (Mark 9:24)! The father is measured in degrees of genuineness, not degrees of certainty. The father's faith is adequate for his son to be healed.

Why did the disciples fail? The disciples failed because prayer is **Not** reciting words in the right sequence, like a spell or charm, in order to trigger a magical effect on a person, object or situation.

The disciples failed because prayer is **NOT** a technique or formula that we learn so that we can then get what we want. We say, prayer changes things. But what things does it change? We often are so arrogant as to think that if we ask long enough and hard enough, that God will grant our wishes, our demands and desires.

*Why could we not cast it out?* Jesus said, *This kind can come out only through prayer.* What is prayer?

In order to answer this question, I would like us to take a step back and ask, are there some things too big for you or me to handle alone? Are there some circumstances beyond our abilities to deal with? Are there times and situations when we need help?

When I look at the world today, I will admit there are many things which surpass my capacities and abilities to manage or solve: violence, war, virus pandemics, unemployment, poverty, just to name a few.

I'll be honest with you, it's hard to admit there are things which surpass my skills and abilities, because a fair amount of my identity comes from being competent, self-sufficient, independent.

There's something to this. But it's not the whole story. The other part of the story is about need and about vulnerability or, more to the point, my need and my vulnerability. When you think about it, the other part of the story is about humanity. For we were created not to be independent operators, not to be loner Christians, but to be in relationship. God's pronouncement, "*It is not good for the human to be alone,*" means more, I think, than we sometimes realize. In fact, I think it testifies that we were created for relationship: relationship with each other and relationship with God.

At its most basic, prayer is all about being in a relationship with God. And in any relationship, we learn more about the other by speaking our needs, voicing our concerns, expressing our hopes and gratitude, confessing our faith, fears, and failures. We are to pray with passion, with the expectation that God hears our prayers. As Paul says, "Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving" (Col. 4:2) and "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17). How might the world be changed if we prayed earnestly and unceasingly that God's reign of peace and justice, compassion and forgiveness be established in full? More importantly, how might we be changed if we took this prayer seriously?

Speaking to God is only one side of the relationship, however. The other side is listening. Too often we think of prayer as words we offer to God. Sometimes we have a long list of things we think God needs to do for us. But prayer is also a time to be quiet and listen. Really listen. Do you pay attention to the sounds you hear throughout the day? One wise person asked an important question the other day. She said, we are in the midst of this Covid-19 pandemic. What is God calling us to be and do in this extraordinary time? Have you ever thought about that? What's God saying to us in this time?

During this pandemic many are anxious and fearful. With so many stores and businesses closed these days, many people have much more time of their hands. I'll admit that I've kept quite busy learning video editing as I need to get this worship video sent out in a timely manner. But the question, what is God calling us to be and do during Covid-19 wasn't easy for me to hear. Why? Because I had to ask myself whether my priorities, my work, my current efforts are actually in sync with God's kingdom or whether they are a distraction. You see, when we are busy doing, or lost in our personal worries and anxieties, then we are much less likely to take time to listen to what God is saying to us.

When I lived in China, I experienced churches that were packed full of people, not just for one service on Sunday morning but multiple services on Sunday morning,

Sunday evening, and even during the week. My western Christian visitors were always impressed with a sheer number of people in the church. One of my Chinese Christian friend was amused by this great interest in numbers. She said, what the church needs is **quality**, not **quantity**.

In his book, *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster said, “The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, **but for deep people.**” (Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, pg1)

I think Foster’s call for more **deep people** is similar to my Chinese Christian friend’s call for **quality Christians**, over and against **quantity**.

I believe God is constantly trying to get our attention, telling us where God is active in the world, but the vast majority—the intelligent, the gifted, the distracted, the busy, and the anxious—rarely hear God’s voice over all the busyness, the distractions and anxieties. It’s hard to hear the voice of our Creator when we are always talking, are never still or quiet. Spending time in silence will help us cultivate an openness to what God is doing. Spending time listening for God’s voice helps us become deep people.

This was the disciples’ problem. “Why could we not cast it out?” Because the disciples forgot that they were mortal, finite, limited, vulnerable. In other words, they forgot they were only human. In this text the disciples are too enamoured with human thoughts, which leads to a preoccupation with competition, techniques and the need for success. Thinking divine thoughts means trusting in the unlimited power of God to bring about God’s reign. The disciples thought they could heal the boy through their own efforts, their own hard work. The disciples, like us today, have a tendency to be self-reliant instead of God-reliant.

Henri Nouwen once said, prayer “is a way of being empty and useless in the presence of God and so of proclaiming our basic belief that **all is grace and nothing is simply the result of hard work.**”

**All is grace and nothing is simply the result of hard work.”**

Prayer is not only about bringing our concerns to God, it is also about opening ourselves for God to bring about God’s kingdom through us. Prayer creates space in our lives to let go of control and to put our lives into God’s presence. Thanks be to God.