

A Matter of Trust

[Mark 9:14-29](#)

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[Real Audio \(3 MB\)](#)

Each day we live amidst the constant tension between faith and fear. We are constantly making decisions, some conscious, many unconscious, that are based not just on faith but on varying levels of trust.

For instance, on a very basic level, most weeks I sit in one of those chairs and watch someone climb the stairs into the pulpit. Subconsciously, I have faith that whoever constructed that pulpit knew what they were doing. Then when it's my turn to come up here and stand under this big marble overhang, it gets a little more personal and I have to exercise my faith a bit more. Similarly, as you enter the sanctuary, you are probably not too worried that the pews are going to collapse when you sit down.

Having confidence in inanimate objects to hold us up requires a certain amount of trust, and then there's trusting in words to hold us up, trusting in what we say. Each week we recite the Apostles Creed, saying we believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth... and in Jesus Christ his only son our Lord. Most of us don't have a hard time simply believing in God, but for whatever reasons we are more hesitant to truly trust God.

For instance, when someone in our workplace or neighborhood asks if we really believe in that "God stuff," do we trust God enough to talk about our faith with confidence? Or do we fear how they are going to react to what we say we believe? That question moves us into yet another arena of trust, which is all about trusting others: their words, their actions. Whom do we trust with our lives, with our hearts, and with the lives and hearts of our loved ones? With whom are we safe?

These days we're not feeling very safe. It takes a lot of courage to even walk out the front door. There's always been a lot of violence in this world. I remember hearing stories about snipers in Sarajevo during the most recent war in Bosnia. It was terrible, but it was so far away. The fear of snipers has gotten a lot more personal lately.

So many of the newspaper articles these past 11 days have (understandably) been focusing on our fear. Fear is our emotional response to danger. Fear is good when it motivates us to move away from the danger or resolve the source of fear. Yet fear can also be a problem. It can hold us captive so that we live less and less of life. How do we believers in God, followers of Christ, live in the tension between faith and fear? Do we trust that God will make a difference?

Our scripture takes us into the life of a parent who is terrified of losing his son. His boy is being terrorized by an evil spirit, a spirit trying to destroy his life. At the beginning of our text we find a great crowd of people gathered at the base of a mountain. There's shouting, arguing, and in the middle of this crowd, at the center of it all, are the disciples and some scribes. There's lots of anxiety in this situation. Jesus enters the scene and wonders what is going on.

Jesus had just returned from a mountaintop experience - literally. He had been at the top of a mountain with Peter, James, and John. There his clothes had become glowing white (what we now call the transfiguration). They had seen Moses and Elijah. It had been quite a day, and then he came back down the mountain to a crowd of bickering, stressed-out people. Everyone is feeling powerless, and they're taking it out on each other. There were scribes confronting the disciples - probably trying to gather evidence against Jesus, or maybe they were questioning the disciples about whether or not they had the authority to attempt an exorcism.

Jesus asks them what they're arguing about, and a man comes forth from the crowd and says, "Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit..." The father goes on to explain that this spirit was destroying the

child's life. The father had asked the disciples to help him cast out the spirit, but they couldn't do it, which I'm sure was a big setback to his faith.

It's one thing when we're trying to trust God with our own lives, and it's a whole other thing when we see our loved ones suffering, especially for parents. We want to protect and be protected, and yet in this fallen world there are many times when things are out of our hands.

Just as the father had brought his hurting boy to Jesus, we bring Jesus our pain, our concerns, our worries. We come with hope that Jesus can heal the deep wounds caused by broken bodies, broken bank accounts, broken hearts. But then like the father in the story, we say, "If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." We come for help, but then we back away.

Like the father, we too have experienced the disappointment of not being helped by those to whom we turn. People tell us things, and then they don't come through for us. We've all been burned and we've burned others at one time or another. And the pain of our wounds makes it harder to believe, harder to trust. So with our guards up, we tentatively bring our pleas to Jesus, saying, "I believe you can, but then again I've been let down before and I don't want to get my hopes up too much. So if you don't want to, Lord, if you don't have time for me—if you're able, that would be great, but if it's a problem, don't worry about it."

Jesus, who is already exasperated with the disciples because the boy hadn't been healed, answers, "If you are able! All things can be done for the one who believes." Jesus for a moment loses his patience with the boy's father, saying in essence, "As regards your remark about my ability to help your son, I tell you everything depends upon your ability to believe, not on mine to act."

We used to be more trusting, but the older we get the more we've come to realize that the world is a hard, often unpredictable place to live in, and we have become skeptical, cynical. We become more and more dependent on what we can do on our own than on what we believe Jesus can do.

Thankfully, God understands the fragility of our hearts and puts up with our doubts. When the father cries out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" This is all Jesus needs to hear. He recognizes that deep down the father trusts him. What the father doesn't trust is his own ability to stand strong in faith. But the father still has hope, so he asks Jesus to help him with his unbelief. And Jesus' response is to have compassion and to heal the boy.

Now saying, "I believe, help my unbelief!" is not a formula for automatically having all our prayers answered. Faith requires more than believing in a formula. Faith requires recognizing that we live in a fallen world and accepting that God's ways of healing are not always our ways. Healing doesn't always happen on this side of life.

So how do we get to the place of trust? There are four things to practice that I believe will help us in the days ahead. First, trust God to be your loving parent. Just as the father in our scripture wanted so badly for his son to be healed, so does God want us to be healed. In Matthew 18, Jesus says to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." God wants us to come to him with childlike faith!

How often do we see little children come up to their parents and say, "Mom, I'm hungry. I know I've seen you make a thousand (maybe even a million) peanut butter sandwiches, but... I don't know—if you're able—could you make me some lunch?" No, unless they are living in poverty, they don't question their mom's ability to stop their hunger. They say, "I'm hungry! What's for lunch?"

When children fall and scrape their knees, they don't run to their parents and say, "If you're able, could you fix my owie?" No, they say, "Mommy/Daddy, I need a band aid." At a very young age, most kids (at least those who live in good homes) don't even hesitate to trust that their parents will take care of them. Faith is a matter of childlike surrender, of total dependency on God.

Part of this is believing that as a loving parent God continues to have patience with us even when we turn

away from him, disappoint him, misuse what he has entrusted into our care. Recently I read an article by John Poch in the latest issue of Re:generation Quarterly magazine. Poch writes:

About ten years ago I remember saying to a pastor I respected, "More and more it seems evident that we hurt the world by our very presence, so why would God create man?" He said that was a good one, and he never really got it till he became a father. You have a child that trashes things constantly, but you are the maker and caretaker of this child. The child gives you almost nothing but demands and problems. But you are involved in a love enterprise where sometimes incomprehensible feelings wash over you for virtually no reason at all. Sure, you see yourself in the child, which is a little selfish, but most of the time you're just participating in a love that comes from giving and giving. Giving life. You continue cleaning up after him/her and you say to yourself, one day the child will love me back and stop making a mess. And hopefully, she does, but that's not the issue. The issue is love.

Just think of our own compassion toward children. When we heard that a 13-year-old boy had been shot this past week, our hearts went out to him. Many of us were enraged and thought, "How dare he harm an innocent child!" It was as though that little boy was one of our own. If we care about a child whom we don't even know, just imagine how strongly God cares about each of his children. God, who in Psalm 139 says, "knit us together in our mother's womb," loves each of his children and desires an intimate relationship with us. So, first, trust that God patiently loves you as a parent loves their child. Second, trust that God's presence is with you always. Jesus' last words to his disciples were, "...and I will be with you always..." But, we ask, if God loves us so much, then why is there all this pain and suffering? I believe that suffering and death were never supposed to be part of our story. Yet in this world's fallen state there is a lot of pain and death around us. I also have seen (more times than I can count), God enter a heart-wrenching situation and through his love bring new strength, resources, and guidance to help people get through the hardest of situations.

Most people will tell you that in a time of terrible suffering, they don't want an explanation. They don't want to hear that it must be part of God's plan. Rather, they want your presence. They just want you to listen. God's presence can be experienced when we're alone, and often it can be experienced through the loving presence of someone who cares and is just there for them.

Much of our fear is that of being separated from those we love. We want to cling to people, things that we know we won't be able to always cling to here on earth. As followers of Christ we do have something we can cling to which is the beautiful promise in scripture that nothing and no one can ever separate us from the love of God.

The Heidelberg Catechism in our Book of Confessions, begins with the question: What is your only comfort in life and in death? The answer is: That I belong - body and soul, in life and in death - not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil."

As Christians we can have the wonderful hope that we are ultimately in God's hands. We are guaranteed that if we place our faith in Jesus, we'll be okay in the eternal scheme of things. As Christians we don't need to fear death. Of course, the process of dying can be hard, but for believers death itself is the gateway to a beautiful new life where there is no more pain or tears. And this is our hope, that even though we go through hard times on earth, if we place our trust in Jesus Christ, we can be together for eternity.

Brennan Manning wrote a wonderful book called Ruthless Trust. In it he says that Jesus assures us of two things, presence and promise - "I will be with you always." Manning says that faith combined with hope grows into trust. Ruthless trust is faith in the person of Jesus and hope in his promise.

So (to review), trust God to be our loving parent, trust God to always be present, and third.... deepen your trust in God through prayer.

Reach out to God for help! Let's keep confessing our weaknesses... "I believe; help my unbelief!" Faith expressed through prayer that's what Jesus told the disciples they needed to heal the boy. The disciples had been relying on their own abilities. But Jesus asks us to trust in the power that can be released

through him, even when he is physically absent (which is why we pray in Jesus' name).

Prayer involves trusting that God will take care of us like nobody else is able to do, trusting that God is incomparably other. There is no other like God. Prayer requires patience. Developing our trust in God takes time. It takes spending lots of time with God; time learning to recognize God's voice and God's many acts of faithfulness.

So building trust in God requires approaching God as our loving parent, trusting in God's presence and having hope in his promise, going to God in prayer and lastly, living with purpose.

As God's children - God's people - we are not to live passive lives. God will do what only he can do, and our job is to do what we can do. As the church, we have a great opportunity to help build trust among the people of the world. When people develop trust in God, then they develop a greater security in their identity as God's children, God's people. Then it usually follows that competition with others (over territory, jobs, affection, whatever) turns into compassion for others.

All people need attention, encouragement. Some people look for the attention in terribly destructive ways. As God's family, the church has the opportunity to offer God's love and encouragement so that people will grow into who God intended them to be. We can channel our fear (use that energy) in constructive ways. We certainly can begin right here in the sanctuary....after the service reaching around introducing yourself to someone. There are all kinds of ways to build trust. Reach out to your neighbors, volunteer at a local ministry, go on a mission trip, invite an international student over for dinner. (Did you know that about 95% of all international students who come to study in the US never enter an American home? Many of those students return to their homes and become leaders of their countries. What a great opportunity we to develop friendships and grow the bonds of trust among the countries of this world.)

Especially in these frightening times, there are all kinds of opportunities to share with others the loving God in whom you put your faith, the reason that you have hope and how your faith combined with hope has developed into trust in God's sovereign care.

The good news for this world is that Jesus rose from the dead and that through faith in his resurrection power Jesus can lift us up into life eternal. It's a matter of trust.

Let us pray...Lord Jesus, we believe; help our unbelief. Abba father, help us surrender our will and our lives to you today, without reservation and with humble confidence, for you are our loving parent. Set us free from self-consciousness, from anxiety about today and tomorrow, so that we may find joy and delight simply and solely in pleasing you. We love you with all our hearts and we place all our confidence in you, for you are our Abba. Amen.