

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Stumbling: Helping Unbelief”

Dr. Jay Howell

Mark 9:14-29

August 14, 2022

Today we’re starting a new series called “Stumbling.” We’ll spend a bit of time in the Gospels, a bit of time in the Book of Acts, but the questions we’ll be asking along the way—and, God willing, the Lord’s good news from Scripture in response to those questions—all have to do with a walk of faith that is never neat and tidy but always, inevitably messy. Sometimes the messiness is a walk we do on our own, while sometimes it’s just a bit messy when we walk it together as a church. There are obstacles; there are missteps; there are falls. There are U turns, missed exits, and turning in circles. But perhaps the most tragic part of this inevitably messy aspect of seeking a life of faith is that we can often get caught up believing that we’re the only one, the only one facing those trials, those uncertainties, and therefore too often feel all too isolated, or even like an impostor.

And my hope is that along the way we will hear the good news of Christ in Scripture that uncertainty or stumbles aren’t the opposite of faith. They’re a part of it.

And today we read a story from Jesus’ ministry in which a desperate father acknowledges that all too human, all too messy notion: doubt. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

14 When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them and some scribes arguing with them. 15 When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. 16 He asked them, “What are you arguing about with them?” 17 Someone from the crowd answered him, “Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak, 18 and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid, and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.” 19 He answered them, “You faithless generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.” 20 And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. 21 Jesus asked the father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. 22 It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, help us! Have compassion on us!” 23 Jesus said to him, “If you are able! All things can be done for the one who believes.” 24 Immediately the father of the child cried out, “I believe; help my unbelief!” 25 When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!” 26 After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, “He is dead.” 27 But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. 28 When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?” 29 He said to them, “This kind can come out only through prayer.”

Mark 9:14-29

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Years ago, I spent some time with a good friend from high school. We had gone our separate ways after we graduated, drifted apart, didn't really stay in touch, but then I happened to be passing through Portland, Oregon, where he had moved. So I crashed on his couch for a few nights. He had a day job, so in some respects it was just a place to sleep while I explored the city, but in the evenings we were able to catch up, remember old times, slip into old rhythms, that whole thing. But then I think we were also all too aware of what had changed.

You see, he and I were especially close not just in high school together but in growing up at church together, in youth group, in Bible studies, mission trips, retreats, the whole nine yards. We grew up in faith together.

At that point in time, even though I was kind of living the backpacker life, I was set to start seminary later that year, meaning, at the very least, you could safely assume that faith and Jesus and church still had a somewhat positive association for me. My friend on the other hand, really since he had left high school, had for one reason or another fallen away from it. And I already knew that the notion of Christian faith wasn't as close to his heart as it had been when we were in high school, and of course he knew that I was on the way to seminary. We had just never really caught up along those lines in a long, long time. But one night while I was there, we did, there in his little apartment in Portland, Oregon. It was one of those conversations that seem only able to happen late at night, when you're both kind of tired, and the defenses come down a little bit. And long story short for my friend, he shared with me, "I wish it was still as easy for me to believe as I used to; I really do." And there was a tinge of sadness to his voice when he said it, like it was something or someone he lost and was grieving.

Some of you may have folks you know and love who might say something similar. Some of you might say something like that yourselves. And if you're anything like my friend, it wasn't dismissive, as in, oh that silly stuff I used to think when I was a kid; that was dumb. It was, as he said, something he wished he could still do, still have, as easily as he used to, but it just didn't come that way anymore for him.

There's a person in the story we read from Jesus' ministry who might very well be in the same camp. We meet him as a desperate father in the middle of a crowd, trying to get some help for his son, and thought maybe this Jesus was someone that could. Jesus, for his part, wasn't even there when the father first there, so he goes to the disciples that are there. Mark brings us into it in the middle of things. The father goes to the disciples who are there, but apparently they can't do anything for his son. Word had spread that not only Jesus but his disciples as well were able to heal the sick and cast out demons. They were going all over the place doing just that. But apparently, that didn't work for his son. Nevertheless while he was there, a crowd gathers around them, and then some religious authorities, some scribes show up, and now for whatever reason, the disciples are arguing with the scribes about why they could not heal this boy.

I wonder what that argument may have sounded like. Mark doesn't give us much to go on, only that a lot of people were there to witness it. Maybe the scribes came in, smelled a bit of blood in the water with these followers of Jesus having failed so publicly. Maybe they started saying things like, "You see? Just like we've been saying. It's all a hoax, all smoke and mirrors. Here are these followers of a false prophet. Look everyone. They can't help this man and his son." Naturally, the disciples may have felt the need to justify themselves. They were already probably feeling embarrassed, maybe even exposed. They had been able to heal so many others, but then for some reason, here in front of this big crowd, they couldn't do that anymore. Then here come these scribes really rubbing salt in the wound, questioning not just their own power and faithfulness, but the truth of the one they follow. So now they're entering the fray, I would think, defending themselves, defending the honor of Jesus against this challenge, getting into this big war of words with these scribes in front of this crowd. No doubt

Scripture got cited at one point or another. No doubt voices were raised. And I have little doubt that in the heat of the moment, much like I would have, they were almost solely focused on vindicating themselves in front of their opponents. And you know who seems to have been forgotten in this whole exchange while they're all arguing in the midst of the crowd? The desperate father, and his afflicted son.

Try to imagine what this boy's life had looked like. From childhood he would be seized, thrown down, mouth foaming, teeth grinding, body rigid. He couldn't even speak. He'd be thrown into fire and burned, or into water and nearly drowned. You don't have to read between the lines too far to assume that this boy for most of his young life and known little but pain and affliction physically, but also alienation, being ostracized for this spirit that was in him.

Then try to imagine what it had to have been like for the boy's father, seeing these horrible things happen to his son, unable to do anything about it, his heartbreaking every day he saw his son cast down by this spirit and then cast aside by those who would claim to be able to help him, exhausting every option, praying every prayer, and yet God seemed quiet, and nothing seemed to make things better for his son whom he loved.

And then you hear that there's this man named Jesus in the area who had started to heal. Those with illnesses were cured. Those possessed by spirits were freed. So you seek out this man. A last resort, maybe, but you're desperate. You'll try anything at this point. You hear his followers are nearby, so you go to them. Jesus himself isn't with them, but hey, you heard his disciples could do the same things, so you ask them to do for your son what no one else has been able to do. Do you dare to get your hopes up again? Do you think that after disappointment after disappointment, after every bit of silence from the Lord, things might finally change for your child? Do you dare to believe a little again?

You bring your son to them. They do apparently what they would do normally, but nothing happens. Still the same for your son. You think maybe the disciples might try again, might try something else, some other words, some other remedy they might know about. You think at least they might offer a kind word to a suffering boy and his father. But instead what do you see them do? They make your child fodder for a religious debate out here in front of everyone.

Seems my friend in Portland encountered something similar. That night when he and I were talking, I learned that his older sister, who had also been a friend, had gone through some changes and challenges in her own life, and it was the sort of thing that became a point of disagreement among their friends, within their church (our old church), even within their family. And though he never shared so directly, I couldn't help but see the pain that he felt for his sister, to see her ostracized, cast aside by some, to see her situation as fodder for religious debate. And I couldn't help but see the pain that he felt himself, that many who claimed to follow this Jesus, as he once believed he did, did not treat his sister with compassion. No doubt all of that made it a lot harder to believe in the way he used to.

That's where this father was, there in the crowd, listening to the disciples and scribes argue about who's right and who's wrong and how his son featured into their rightness and wrongness. Why did it have to be so hard for him when it looked so easy for everyone else? Why did it have to be so hard for his son? Put yourself in his shoes. How easy is it going to be for you to believe anything that any of these clowns tell you? But then Jesus comes to town. He comes into the fray and asks what all the argument was about. So the father speaks up. I'm actually kind of surprised he spoke up. I'd almost expect him to have written off the whole thing and left. But he tells Jesus his son's situation and what had happened: that his disciples couldn't help him.

Jesus' temper flares—I think that's fair to say his temper flared; Jesus wasn't this zen monk walking around. He turns, it seems, to everyone else there. "You faithless generation," he says, "how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you?" You wonder just what it was about the whole thing that him so mad. Was it that the disciples couldn't heal the boy? Maybe. But I think it was something else. I think it was that his disciples had forgotten about the boy a while ago and were just arguing to vindicate themselves, ignoring the one who had been brought to them for healing.

The father sees Jesus dress down this crowd, even his own followers, who had been so callous toward him and his boy, and he feels that some small measure of justice had been served, and so when Jesus asked him how long this had been happening to his son, the father is very polite. "If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." Maybe he's guarding himself from further letdown, not letting himself get his hopes up too much, just to be devastated yet again, not letting himself believe too strongly.

I wish I could have heard Jesus' tone when he responds. "If you are able! All things can be done for the one who believes."

There could be a lot to unpack just from that short answer, but the father doesn't give us that kind of time. It says that "immediately" the father responds, and not just responds, he cries out, as if he didn't even give himself a moment to think before he said something. It was part desperation, part wanting to fulfil whatever requirement this healer had put in front of him to tend to his son, part frustration and exhaustion with everything he had just seen from the inept disciples and sanctimonious crowd and scribes, but even with all of that, he responds it seems without thinking but still manages to say the truest thing he had ever said in his life: "I believe! Help my unbelief."

Jesus heals the boy, casts out the spirit, and lifts him up.

How many of us, if pushed to desperation, if pushed to give an answer, even without thinking, would say the exact same thing? "I believe! Help my unbelief." A contradiction, on the surface of it, but the truest thing we might ever say in our lives. "I believe! Help my unbelief."

The heartbreaking thing is that at one point or another, every single one of us would be able to utter those powerful, conflicted words, and yet too often we feel like we're the only one, that we'd be looked at strangely if we did. Unbelief can take a lot of different shapes, doubt in God, doubt in theology, doubt in Scripture, but I would go so far as to say that more often it's rooted in doubt in the church, doubt in those that say they follow Jesus, doubt in someone who looks like me. And who's to blame them? We've given them plenty of reasons to.

But the truly heartbreaking thing is that once someone feels what they might consider to be doubt, uncertainty, unbelief in their own heart, they may feel unwelcome among those who make it look like they believe without much trouble. Why is it so easy for them, when it's so hard for me? Why can't I just believe? Why can't I just believe like I used to?

Yet while the disciples and the scribes go on arguing about what is right and wrong, here's Jesus speaking with this man, this father. He doesn't bat an eye at this doubter, this imperfect man with an imperfect faith. And strangely, someone who says "I believe! Help my unbelief" feels all too welcome in Jesus' company.

And maybe they should feel just as welcome among those who claim to follow him.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.