

Sermon Draft for September 15, 2024

Text: Mark 9:14–29

Sermon: “God Is Able”

There are things that no matter how hard we try and try again, we simply cannot do. I have been removing stumps in our field. I’ve taken out over 30, different sizes. There are three stumps that I’ve repeatedly worked on to no avail. These three stumps stand as proof to me of that fact. The rest of the field is cleared, and the holes are filled in, but the three stumps remain. The many marks of the axe on the stumps are proof positive that I tried and tried again until my poor sweating body simply couldn’t try anymore. And I was not able. I was not up to the job.

Such was the disciples’ realization when a desperate father asked them to drive a demon out of his son. They’d tried, probably relying on their own rookie skills as exorcists and not been up to the job. It took Jesus stepping in to rescue the boy (Mark 9:14–29).

So now look on Jesus, sweating in agony on Calvary, trying and trying for us until it was all finished. No, beloved, there are no stumps left to be removed at the foot of the cross. What we are not able to do he has accomplished. It is finished. Christ has done it all. He is more than able to take care of all things for us. So, look upon the wounds in his hands and feet and his side today as he comes to us in his body and blood, and let us leave all our fears, worries, and cares in his most able and capable hands.

Our text begins the descent toward Jerusalem in the Gospel according to Mark. The event it records occurs right after the transfiguration and is immediately preceded and followed by Jesus speaking of his coming death and resurrection. This death and resurrection bookending of the text in the Gospel highlights its events as a proclamation of our Lord, who has come to do what we are unable to do, rescue us from the power of sin, death, and the devil.

“And they were not able” (v 18). They were not up to the job.

Yes, that is a doubt that has plagued me and most people sometime in our life. Why? Because there are times for all of us that it is simply true. There are things that no matter how hard we try and try again, we simply cannot do.

The rest of the stumps have been removed and burned, but those three remaining stumps remain. The many marks of the axe apparent proof positive that I tried and tried again until I couldn't try anymore. And I was not able. I was not up to the job.

No, the disciples were not up to the job. They had tried to help the poor father and his helpless son, but they could not. Our hearts go out to this poor dad! How awful it must have been to watch his poor dear boy being convulsed on the ground, foaming at the mouth until he went rigid as if he were dead. It's bad enough when our children are sick, but to know that it's a spirit throwing your kid about how horrible that must have been! We can hear the heartbreaking anguish in the man's voice as he appeals to Jesus.

Without question, the disciples would have been moved by the father's appeal when he first came to them. Without doubt, they had tried and tried again, but nothing had happened. How hard it must have been for the disciples to face this father and crowd desperately looking to them for help and face the fact that they were not able. It's not like they hadn't done it before. The Gospel record is clear that Christ's disciples cast out demons in his name while he was with them and after he ascended into heaven. But this time they were not able. This is the way that God works sometimes to teach us and deepen us in the truth.

Yes, that's the way it works sometimes. Sometimes we are not able, even if we were able before or at another time. Some have argued that the boy was obviously suffering from epilepsy and that the disciples were wrongly treating him as if he were possessed by a demon and that's why their exorcism didn't work. But the Lord Jesus makes it clear that even if it was epilepsy, an unclean spirit was clearly behind it.

Jesus casts out the demon and frees the boy from its power.

This is one of those places in Scripture where it's made clear that no matter what trouble there is in this world, whether it's a sickness of the body or mind, or destructive weather like tornadoes, hurricanes, and drought, or even global pandemics, we can be certain the devil and his crew are at the root of it.

Just because we can explain it by biology or climatology, or some other science doesn't mean there's not some evil spiritual force at work. The thought may frighten some or cause others to raise their eyebrows, but it shouldn't for us. We know there is a real spiritual world, and that Jesus is the Lord over it all, both good and bad.

No, the problem was not a misdiagnosis on the disciples' part. Their problem was the same as the poor father's when he stood before Jesus and said, ***"If you can do anything"*** (v 22). It was a problem of faith.

As shocking as it may be to hear someone saying “***If you can***” to Jesus, it is understandable, given that his followers had just failed to help the man and his boy. It wasn’t the first time and wouldn’t be the last that the failures of Jesus’ followers would reflect on the Lord.

Yes, there’s plenty of that going on, even in our day and age. And while you and I may never actually say “If you can” to the Lord out loud, we certainly live it out when we allow the troubles and trials that we face in this world to weigh us down and rob us of our peace, as if we didn’t have a Lord and Savior in Jesus who can do all things.

Yes, beloved, the Lord’s good purpose in allowing us to face times when we are not able is to strengthen and deepen our faith in him who is able, in Jesus. The Lord reveals this to the disciples when he answers their question about why they couldn’t cast the spirit out, and he says, “***This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer***” (v 29).

To be clear here, Jesus is not telling the disciples that they needed to add something else to all their own efforts to make the exorcism work. He is in fact telling them to let their efforts go and cast themselves completely on the Lord and his strength. What the Lord showed them in all of this was that they were in fact not able, but that he was able to do all things through them.

Yes, all of this is about faith, as Jesus himself says to the boy's father: ***“All things are possible for one who believes”*** (v 23). Faith or believing, however, we have to understand, does not find its power in itself. No, the power is always in faith's object and faith's object alone, in Jesus. The trust of my heart does not accomplish anything; it's Jesus, in whom my heart trusts, who does it all.

Jesus is not telling his disciples that if they commit their minds and hearts to something and then pray a whole lot about it, it will happen. No, he is telling them to let it all go and leave it in his hands, in the truth that he is able, even when they are not.

As Jesus in mercy helps the father and delivers his poor boy before our eyes in the Gospel today, he is at work to deepen and strengthen us in the truth that he is more than able to deal with anything and everything that we face in this sin-troubled world. He is at work to strengthen and grow the weak faith that lives in each of our poor sinful hearts by drawing our eyes away from ourselves and what we are not able to do to him who can do and has done all things well. Christ most certainly can do what we are entirely unable to do.

Christ furthers the work of his Word at the altar this morning as he comes to us in his body and blood, directing our eyes and hearts to the cross, where he won an eternal victory over sin, death, and hell for us with his bitter sufferings and death.

Look on him sweating in agony there, trying and trying for you until it was all finished. There are no stumps left to be removed at the foot of the cross.

What we were not able to do he has accomplished. It is finished.

Christ has done it all. He is more than able to take care of all things. So, look upon the wounds in his hands and feet and his side today as he comes to us in his body and blood, and leave all your fears, worries, and cares in his most able and capable hands.

Amen