

**Believing in a Father who Loves Lost Children
based on Mark 9:14-29, David Jahnke, 7/19/15**

For those of you who are visiting, I am working my way through the gospel of Mark this year. And I was talking with my sister Laura last week about my last sermon in which Christ called us down from the mountaintop where we know him transfigured and give up our privileges in order to bless the underprivileged. She said that sounded right but that she was not sure how to do that. I said that it involves going into underprivileged communities through programs in which you get to know each other and share mutual blessings.

This is what the disciples were doing without the benefit of programs after they came down from the mountain. Things were going well until they came across someone they could not heal. This led to arguments with the official leaders around there.

This is the first of three arguments in chapter nine as later we see the disciples arguing about which of them is the greatest. Jesus tells them that they must be last and least if they want to be first and greatest.

And then in the very next passage, someone is healing in Jesus' name even though he is not Jesus' follower and the disciples want to stop him. But Jesus did not let them stop him saying, "Anyone who is not against us is for us." I will not preach on this today but think about that and take it to heart.

So power and authority; who has the right and who is right; these pervade these passages and the gospel of Mark in general. The disciples were claiming authority and power that belonged to God and to official leaders. They believed that they could lift people up out of physical, emotional, mental and spiritual sickness because they themselves had been lifted into new life by Jesus who then sent them out with his power and authority. They were simple people outside the halls of power now claiming God's power.

The same thing was at work in our nation's founding. I went to the oldest Presbyterian Church in the country out in Southampton last Sunday. They are celebrating their 375th anniversary and there were 22 flags and 24 banners draped around the sanctuary to make clear to everyone the strength and wisdom of God which was with our founding fathers and mothers.

The Puritans knew that that they could read and understand scripture themselves; they could govern themselves. They were free and empowered to live according to their conscience and the rule of Law as led by the Word and Spirit of God.

We see a form of this in our African-American brothers and sisters who are raising their voices that black lives matter. They are reclaiming their authority; their power; their responsibility as well because God's healing and prosperity begin at home. They are reclaiming their destiny which is no different than ours—to live freely and faithfully as beloved children of God. We reformed Christians who have this rising up to into freedom in our history should celebrate this call to personal and communal liberation.

Even still today we and all children of God are weighed down by evil powers and principalities that try to silence us, just as they did the possessed boy. And just as everyone knew there was something terribly wrong with the boy, we all recognize evil in our midst. And then the question is we will argue and battle each other over politics and faith traditions and strategies and who is to blame for the lack of healing. This is rooted in the self-righteousness of the teachers of the law and the disciples who allowed pride and differences to divide them.

And Jesus is so frustrated with this, saying, “How long will I have to put up with this unbelieving generation?” Everyone was lacking the kind of faith that overcomes evil powers and how they divide and alienate us. Jesus taught the disciples that they would overcome evil through believing in and remembering him and His Father over and over again. In other words it happens through prayer.

A quick initial word about what prayer is not. Facebook friends of mine were bickering about welfare. One who had been on welfare and knew the work requirements in their state was challenging the assertions of the other. Another then spoke of how one can go into communities and help struggling children and elderly who are on welfare, “Or you can always continue to complain about the problem, go to church and ‘pray’ for the unfortunate.”

Prayer and worship never replace service. They are fuel for service and a call to it. They recognize that we are all connected and that our thoughts toward others matter. The thoughts stir us to act and the service itself is a form of prayer just as prayer and worship are forms of service! There is a reason this is called a worship service!

But prayer is also critical for overcoming evil personally. For at least a decade, I struggled with feelings of separation and alienation. And one day as I was really down in the dumps, I decided to try prayer which I did not believe in but I thought, "Why not?" And the experience and transformation of my outlook on life was so dramatic and continued to be as I kept praying that for months I tried to pray five times a day.

I could not keep the rigor of it and I started to notice that the same emptiness and irritability which came when I did not exercise also came when I did not pray. But as soon as I returned to prayer, I felt connected and I felt whole again. I cannot explain this other than to say what Jesus said to the disciples about evil spirits, "This kind can only come out through prayer."

Now if you want a psychological explanation for how prayer works personally and inter-personally, it's pretty straightforward. Prayers of thanksgiving open us up to receiving every day and everything as a gift to be enjoyed. What a difference that makes on your outlook! Prayers of praise by their very nature lift our spirits as we remember the grandeur and love of God. Somebody asked me the other day about charismatic Christians who lift their hands in praise. Their spirits are being lifted up as they praise God for who he is...

Prayers of confession-- acknowledging the mistakes we make, regretting them, apologizing for them and asking God to purify us gradually does purify us. How else can we change negative patterns of behavior other than by regretting them and believing we can be better by the grace and power of God?

Petitional prayers that ask for God's help and remember his sovereign power throw off the burdens of anxiety, fear and despair. And all of these forms of prayer remember the One who is always with us and who connects us all in love.

A song called Don't Carry it All by the Decemberists has been coming over my ipod again and again recently. The song ends...

You must bear your neighbors burden within reason.
And your labors will be borne when all is done,
Let the yoke fall from your shoulders,
Don't carry it all...don't carry it all,
We are all our hands and holders,
Beneath this bold and brilliant sun
This I swear to all...

I swear to you that we are all our hands and feet and eyes and ears; we are all each other's holders, called to bear each other's burden sometimes within reason and sometimes beyond it. And the only reason for this is because we are held in the hands of a Father who created and loves and bears all of our burdens together with us and calls us to join in.

I got to thinking about the Father of this possessed boy. He had seen his child tossed and turned and traumatized by evil spirits for years. All he wanted was for his child was to be free and happy and healthy. And he still believed that his child could be healed deep in his gut, despite everything. And though the child was like a corpse, Jesus lifted him to his feet to experience the wonder of a life no longer plagued by evil.

Now think about the Love of our Father in heaven for all his children who are plagued by evil. Does he not want us all to be free? And if the limited faith of the boy's father was sufficient when combined with Jesus, how could the faithfulness of our Father in heaven not suffice? Do you believe in a Creator? Do you believe that any good Creator would love and want to be together forever with his children? And even in times of doubt, does God not hear our cry to help us in our unbelief? I think he hears such cries even when they come from our subconscious.

So will God one day clear away all of the dark ambiguity and uncertainty...raising us up and opening our eyes to see the wonders of the world we have always longed for.

Believe it and let that world come to life around you even now through the God of amazing grace who calls us to eternal union with Jesus Christ and to whom belongs all the power and the glory now and forevermore. And God's people say...