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Mark 9:14-29: *The Way of Discipleship: Dependence*

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This is the second week of Lent...

Historically it's season of preparation in the church.

It's a time to examine our lives as we look forward to the most important events of our faith:

The death of Christ on the cross...

And the resurrection 3 days later.

Lent is a season to look at our lives as disciples...

We've been practicing spiritual disciplines before service for 2 weeks now...

So if you're interested in that I encourage you to join.

We have a reflective paint night coming up (see bulletin)...

And we've been going through this series from the middle of Mark's Gospel:

"The Way of Discipleship."

As disciples we're following where Christ walked.

We're walking to the Good Friday cross and the empty tomb of Easter...

And we're allowing the Spirit to teach us through Mark's Gospel.

Today we're looking at another one of Jesus' teachings to his disciples...

He's teaching them about dependence...

Not dependence on themselves...

But on God.

To set the scene:

Jesus and his three close friends—Peter, James and John—are just coming down the mountain...

Jesus took them up there for the Transfiguration...

And now they're coming back to rejoin the disciples.

This is from Mark 9:14-29.

As I read I want you to follow along...

And especially pay attention to what's going on with the disciples...

Remember we're looking at how Jesus is teaching his disciples in this series...

Discipleship is our focus...

So pay attention to that relationship.

Hear now God's Word to us from the book of Mark.

¹⁴ When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. ¹⁵ As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

¹⁶ "What are you arguing with them about?" he asked.

¹⁷ A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. ¹⁸ Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

¹⁹ "You unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me."

²⁰ So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

²¹ Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?"

"From childhood," he answered. ²² "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."

²³ "'If you can?'" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes."

²⁴ Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

²⁵ When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again."

²⁶ The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

²⁸ After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?”

²⁹ He replied, “This kind can come out only by prayer.”

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

Failure, confusion, and frustration.

I’m sure these were some of the feelings experienced by the disciples.

While Jesus and the three are up on a mountain...

A man approaches the disciples, the ones who stayed behind...

The man has his son with him...

And his son is possessed by an unclean spirit.

This is nothing new to the disciples.

Earlier on in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus sent the disciples out...

“He gave the 12 authority over the unclean spirits...and they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them” (6:7, 13)

They’re familiar with casting out spirits...

They probably see the man coming with his sick child...

Andrew and Philip probably high five and fist bump each other...

Getting ready for another healing...

Another miracle.

Full of confidence they take the boy and demand that the spirit comes out...

Nothing.

The crowd that gathered in excitement and anticipation—

Knowing the reputation of Jesus’ disciples—

Start whispering among themselves.

Hearing the whispers and starting to feel the pressure the disciples try it again...

“Spirit, I command you to come out of this boy!”

...nothing.

The disciples are embarrassed and confused by the time Jesus shows up.

He comes onto the scene...

Says some stern words...

And gets the job done.

The boy is brought back to health and the crowd is pleased.

Wondering what happened...

The disciples get Jesus alone and ask:

“How come we couldn’t drive out the demon?”

And Jesus says, “This kind can come out only by prayer.”

Does this mean that the disciples didn’t pray before trying to cast out the demon?

Maybe in the commotion of things—

The excited crowd, the anxious father, the sick boy—

Maybe in the chaos they forgot to pray.

Or maybe they didn’t say the right words...

Or pray long enough.

I think what Jesus is saying is “You were too self-reliant.”

“You lost your dependence on God.”

Remember in these middle chapters of Mark's Gospel...

Mark is concerned with discipleship.

Using the flaws of the disciples, we're seeing how Jesus directs them in the way to walk.

After Jesus feeds a total of 9,000 people in 2 separate incidents...

The disciples still don't get it...

They're still asking about food (Mark 8:16).

They're still failing to grasp who Jesus is and how God the Father works through him.

Then after Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ...

He tries to get Jesus to head in a direction that leads him away from his mission (8:33)...

Still not understanding what this man is all about.

And a few weeks ago we saw how the disciples were dumbfounded at the Transfiguration (9:5).

How they wanted to build shelters for Jesus, Moses and Elijah...

As if to stay on the mountain...

Mark's middle chapters show the confusion and shortcoming of the disciples...

Even though they were following Jesus...

Walking with him for some time now...

They still don't get it.

And now, in our passage, they seem to be relying on themselves...

Thinking it's their own power that they've been using...

Maybe they've forgotten that it's only in Christ's power that they're doing these things.

When I first read this passage I thought:

“Man, Jesus is pretty mean here.”

“It seems like he loses his patience...”

“You unbelieving generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long do I have to put up with you?”

But what he’s doing is borrowing words from the Old Testament...

Referring back to Israel’s time in the wilderness...

When they failed to trust God...

When they failed to depend on God.

“How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them?” (Num 14:11)

“How long will this wicked community grumble against me?” (Num 13:27)

Jesus is directing these words to his disciples...

To his followers...

To those who seem to be walking in the direction of self-sufficiency.

To those who substituted trusting God for trusting themselves.

And this is where many of us are walking today...

In self-sufficiency and self-reliance.

In the Big Book of AA it talks about how this is the human tendency...our tendency.

It says,

“Most people try to live by self-propulsion. Each person is like an actor who wants to run the whole show; is forever trying to arrange the lights, the ballet, the scenery and the rest of the players in my own way. If their arrangements would only stay put, if only people would do as I wished, the show would be great.”

...life would be great...

But what usually happens?

The show doesn't go off very well.

In our self-reliance and independence we cannot heal the boy...

We can't get our husband or wife to act the way we want them to act...

We can't get our kids to take life seriously...

We can't get our work team to cooperate...

We're not effective in our ministry or work...

We commit the same sins over and over again...

Falling into the same trap.

"This kind comes out only by prayer."

We say, "But I do pray!"

"I end my prayers invoking the name of Christ."

"I pray long and I pray hard."

But is it still an attempt to arrange life in the way you think is best?

Is prayer just putting a leash around God, dragging him in your own direction? (Craig Barnes)

Trying to get him to do the things you want him to do?

Just another manifestation of us trying to control things...

Relying on ourselves.

At its heart, prayer is an expression of dependence.

When we come to God in prayer we recognize our place before him.

We are created.

We are human.

We were formed from the dust of the earth...

Which means we have limitations.

This is the way things are supposed to be.

We are not God.

And the act of coming to God in prayer...

Is an act of dependence.

It's saying, "I have limited knowledge..."

"I have limited power..."

"I have limited strength..."

"I have limited patience..."

"I am in need..."

We are taking the posture of humility.

This is the same posture as when we were first called to trust in Christ.

The Spirit opened our eyes to our sin.

We saw that our lives were miserable...

We saw that we were broken...

That we were separated from God...

Disconnected from the source of all life.

The Spirit showed us how we hated God and hated our neighbor (Q&A 5).

We were humbled when the Spirit opened our eyes to the mess we were in.

It was a mess that we weren't able to get ourselves out of.

We were in need...

When God chose us in Christ we were humbled.

It wasn't anything we did...

It was him taking the initiative to bring us back together into his loving arms.

This is the posture we were in when God first grabbed hold of us...

And this is the same posture we take as disciples walking this road of life...

One of dependence.

Nothing has changed.

We are still in need...

And God is still dependable.

When the disciples failed in casting out the spirit...did Jesus give up on them?

Did he throw up his hands and walk away?

“Hopeless, y'all are hopeless!”

Did he leave the father in despair?...

Left to tend to his demon-possessed son?

No, this is a story of grace, thru and thru!

God is dependable.

Jesus casts out the spirit...

And brings the boy life.

Jesus gathers his disciples and teaches them...

He shows them how to be a disciple...

And when they still don't get it...

When they're still lost in their sin...

Lost in their unbelief...

Still unsure of who this guy really is...

This is when Jesus lays down his life for them.

He walks the lonely road to the cross so that they will have life...

So that they will know deep in their guts...

At their very core...

That God does love his people.

God is dependable.

He does not abandon his people.

He hasn't turned his back on you...

And he's not planning to now or ever.

As disciples and as followers of Christ he is calling us to trust.

And being God, He knows our weakness.

He knows our tendency towards self-reliance.

He knows that we like to try doing things in our own power.

He knows that we're a forgetful people.

So he's given us the sacraments...

He invites us to experience *Him* at the Table.

To be nourished for the long journey...

Not just in this Lenten season, but in the long, hard journey of life.

This is God's way of helping us to understand and actually experience his love for his people.