

And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him. And he asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" And someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able." And he answered them, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me." And they brought the boy to him. And when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." And Jesus said to him, "If you can! All things are possible for one who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." And 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." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Back in my seminary days, there were several occasions when our students, staff and faculty either gathered for fellowship or travelled together to some meeting or conference. On one of these journeys, I had offered the seminary secretary the opportunity to ride along with me in my car. I noticed that she was an extremely nervous passenger. Perhaps this was related to the fact that she had travelled with other seminarians, some of whom were known for their heavy feet and racing demeanour on the road. I was far from the worst of the offenders, but obviously was not the calm, staid driver that she hoped I would be. As she sat, grabbing the arm rest, white-knuckled and eyes wide in terror, I calmly reminded her that I had never had an accident; that we were driving a Volvo, considered the safest car on the road at the time, and that I didn't want to hurt myself, so I would be cautious. "Have faith", I told her. I did notice that she was no longer digging her fingers into the arm rest—but she didn't let go of it, either.

"I believe; help my unbelief!" That longing cry of the father in our text often echoes our own day to day struggle. As the worries, fears and pressures of life build up and unleash their fury against us, we wonder if God is there to help us—or even if He can help us. We find ourselves struggling between faith and doubt. We hold on in desperation to the arm-rests of life, afraid to trust in God's goodness for us. But is that because our God is too small? Do we lose sight of the fact that God created the world and everything in it? Do we forget that God, the Son comes to us in human flesh and blood to die and to rise so that He can redeem all of sinful mankind? Do we forget that God, the Holy Spirit *calls us by the Gospel, enlightens us with His gifts, sanctifies and keeps us in the true faith* (SC, 3rd Article) and this almighty, Triune God is indeed able to do even the impossible for the sake of the people He loves so very much?

There was a woman who was known in her community for her simple faith and for her calm serenity in the midst of many trials. There was another woman in a nearby town who had heard of her and her faith. As this woman was also going through some great trials, she felt that she wanted to go and meet this woman, to see if she could learn the secret of contentment from her. Coming up to her, the woman asked, "Are you the woman of great faith?" The other woman replied, "No, I am a woman of little faith in a great God".

Our faith is in a great God. And yet, like the disciples and the father in our text, it often seems that our God is too small. The events described in our text take place just as Jesus is returning from the mount of Transfiguration with Peter, James and John. The other disciples had waited behind, but were soon surrounded by the crowds who flock to the places Jesus went. As Jesus comes near, He hears a group of the scribes arguing with the disciples. When Jesus asks what is going on, a man in the crowd comes to Him and says: ***"Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able."*** This evil spirit had afflicted this boy since childhood. This spirit seems to be a truly nasty variety of

demon. The man tells Jesus: *it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him.* It is no wonder that the father came looking for help. But he was disappointed when the disciples couldn't help. This wasn't the first experience that the disciples would have had with this sort of situation. Jesus had sent them out earlier. We are told: *And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits ... So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.* (Mark 6:7, 12-13 - ESV)

But this time they cannot cast out the demon. We can well imagine that the scribes were having a field day with this event: here were the faithful followers of Jesus, who show just how empty the power of their teacher really is because they can't do anything to help this man.

Jesus' response shows that the disciples have too small a view of God: *"O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me."* Jesus' concern is that the disciples have doubted God's power to help, even with this demon. Jesus does say *"This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."* Prayer, in itself, is an act of faith and trust. We go to our God and seek His help and strength in our needs. Prayer may also need to be persistent and ongoing. Perhaps they gave up too quickly. Did they ask God to help, only to think that maybe this demon was too powerful? If so, their God was too small. But we see the same thing when the father asks Jesus: *But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.* It is that "if" that shows the father's view of God. Jesus puts it all in perspective: *"If you can! All things are possible for one who believes."*

Is your God too small? Abraham Lincoln said: "Faith is not believing that God can, but that God will!" I'm not talking about a "name it and claim it" idea of faith. Faith that is genuine knows the greatness of the God who cares for us—even in the midst of things we do not understand; even in those moments when it seems God isn't responding to our needs. Faith knows God's power to rescue and redeem His people. Paul tells us: *Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.* (Ephesians 3:20-21 - ESV) Our God is too small when we, like the man, can only pray: *if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.* Let us never forget what Jesus says: *All things are possible for one who believes.*

This, my dear people, loved by God, is one of the reasons why we take time to focus on our Christian Education opportunities as a church. We want to our children, our youth, and yes, each and every member of our church family to know that we have a great God. We preach and teach that Word to nurture that little faith in a great God. Paul declares: *"How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ... So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ."* (Romans 10:14, 17, ESV)

Even the greatest of us may have times when our faith falters; when it is weak; when we cry out: *"I believe; help my unbelief!"* Whether it is COVID or cancer or any crisis, there are times when our God is too small. Yet we only have to remember all that Christ has done for us to know how great our God truly is! How blessed we are that the Holy Spirit brings us know and believe that Jesus Christ has saved us from sin, death and hell. The Saviour who casts out demons has done battle for us with the lord of the demons—with Satan himself. Jesus offered His holy, sinless life for wayward, doubting, sinful people like you and me, and died in our place on the cross to pay the price for all sin, including yours, including mine. Jesus dies, but the story isn't over until He has descended into the devil's kingdom to proclaim His victory, and then rises again from the dead to destroy the power of death, too.

One of the songs we sing with the children declares: *Our God is so great, so strong and so mighty; there's nothing our God cannot do.* He can do all that needs to be done, and more. It isn't too hard for the Saviour of the World to wash us clean through Baptism, or to come to us with His body and blood in the bread and wine of Holy Communion, that we may be forgiven through that body and blood given and shed for us. It isn't too hard for the Lord who loves us with an everlasting love to help us in our times of need. The person who comes to the Lord Jesus Christ and says, *Just as I am, though tossed about With many a conflict, many a doubt, Fightings and fears within, without, O Lamb of God, I come, I come* (LSB 570, st. 3) will find that the Lord will erase doubts and will fill the heart with a sure faith.

"I believe; help my unbelief!" The disciples, too, asked: *"Increase our faith!"* (Luke 17:5 - ESV) In those moments when we want to make God too small, unable to help, unable to do the impossible, may we remember all that He has done and is doing for us. And if a small faith in a great God can do the impossible, then just imagine what can a great faith in a great God do! Amen.