

Mark 9:14-29

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 19-B)

Lessons for the Day: Isaiah 50:4-10; James 3:1-12; Mark 9:14-29

No Ifs, Ands, or Buts

September 15, 2024

“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:

“I’m sorry, there is nothing more that we can do.”

For most people, those are the most devastating words in the world. Someone struggles with cancer for years, going through painful and sometimes debilitating surgeries and chemotherapy or radiation treatments. In spite of the best efforts of the medical community and their own personal efforts, the cancer reemerges with a vengeance. “I’m sorry”, says the doctor. “There’s nothing more that we can do.”

I have been with many people over the years as they have struggled with the helplessness and hopelessness we often feel in this world. I have sat with grieving parents as their infant child was dying before them, her blood being poisoned by an infection that the doctors were powerless to stop. Or I think of the saint who had the brain aneurism which was beyond the help of our modern medicine. We face so many things that we cannot prevent, that we cannot fix, where there is nothing we can do. It is easy to see this in those extreme life and death medical situations, but the unsolvable and the unrepairable can happen to us financially, with all our assets being stolen or lost in some other way. It may be that our dream home has been infected with termites and the damage is already beyond repair. It may be that a storm keeps us from getting across the country for a loved one’s funeral or for an essential business meeting. “I’m sorry. There is nothing more that we can do.”

In the face of devastation, despair and disappointment; in those moments when we are overwhelmed by the realities of life and are all but certain there is no hope, we turn to the One who is our Hope, our Life, and our Salvation. In accordance with His perfect, wise and loving will our dear Saviour works to do what needs to be done. Yes, He can do it—no ifs, ands or buts about it!

What comes to your mind when you hear that expression, “no ifs, ands or buts”? We normally use it to emphasize that there are no excuses or reasons for not carrying through on a certain actions. “I want this room cleaned up in the next 20 minutes—no ifs, ands or buts”, says an exasperated mother to her children. “She’s the most qualified candidate, and there are no ifs and buts about it!” I see that expression applying to our text today as we see the Lord of power and might working in the face of the weakness of the disciples, the fears of the father and the struggles of the boy. When there is no one else to help, our God can—and yes, there are no ifs, ands or buts about it.

Let’s set the stage today by looking at the “but” that comes out in our text. The events related here 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. 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. All the commotion that is going on revolves around the fact that the scribes were having a field day with this failure. 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.

The boy needed help, but the disciples couldn’t help. That leads us to the *and*—and what about the father? I’m sure we can empathize with this poor man, who has watched his son endure this horrible demonic agony since childhood. He came looking for help, but the disciples were not up to the task **and** neither was the father. There was nothing he could do to help his son.

Finally we come to the “*if*” of this text. The father tells Jesus how he brought his son to the disciples, **but** they couldn’t help. **And** the father has to acknowledge his own helplessness. Now he turns to Jesus and pours out a prayer from his heart: ***“But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.”***

Jesus’ answer to the man shows that there are no ifs, ands or buts when it comes to God’s grace and mercy at work for His people. ***Jesus said to him, “If you can’t! All things are possible for one who believes.”***

We misunderstand what Jesus says about faith if we think that if we only believe enough and if we only pray hard enough, then whatever we ask will come about. This is what happens with those who have 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. Yes, all things are possible for a faith which trusts all things to the power of Jesus who always exerts his power and ability according to His good and gracious will. Faith never asks anything foolish or wrong of Jesus; requests of that kind are never the product of faith. Faith never demands its own way. Faith always bows to the will of Jesus in all things, trusting He will always do what is best for us and keep us from those things which are hurtful to us.

The Lord of all has shown again and again His power to heal all manner of diseases—leprosy, blindness, haemorrhaging, and anything else you can name. He can make the blind see and the lame to walk—no ifs, ands or buts about it. Here the struggle of the boy is not just a medical need. There is a demon at work, for all the powers of darkness did their worst during Jesus’ earthly life in a futile effort to show that Jesus is powerless over them. Now Jesus casts out the demon and the boy is healed. No ifs, ands or buts about it. He can do what needs to be done for this boy, for his father, and for the disciples, too!

But the greatest joy we have is knowing that the Lord will always work for our good because He has accomplished all that is necessary for our ultimate good. The psalm appointed for this day says: ***“For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling; I will walk before the LORD in the land of the living.”*** (Psalm 116:8–9, ESV) What a joy it is to know that our dear Saviour left the glory of His heavenly home to come and save us from sin, from death, and from all the hopelessness of this world. He came to deliver us from the powers of darkness; from the devil and all his evil, demonic horde. Isaiah knew the work of the Saviour and described it in our Old Testament lesson today: ***“I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting. But the Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame. He who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who is my adversary? Let him come near to me. Behold, the Lord GOD helps me; who will declare me guilty? Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.”*** (Isaiah 50:6–9, ESV) This is the promise and prophecy of the Saviour who would bear your sin, my sin and the sins of the world. He would suffer as He is beaten and bruised, mocked and spat upon. The Sinless One would become the guilty one for us, as He dies for us. Yet He who was without sin was vindicated by the Father as He rises again from the dead. In His death and resurrection, the Lord has cast out all the demons, restoring us and sustaining us in all the needs of this life.

“I’m sorry, there is nothing more that we can do.” Thankfully, my dear people loved by God, there is more that the Lord can do—no ifs, ands or buts. When you are feeling overwhelmed and uncertain, don’t rely on yourself or on the powers of this

world. Turn in prayer and faith to the One who can do all things. Look to your Saviour, because He has loved you, died for you and lives for you. He has brought you forgiveness and will give you the glory of that life that never ends in His wonderful Kingdom. This is His gift to you in the faith He works in you through His Holy Spirit. Amen.