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**Pentecost 17 B, September 15, 2024**

**“The Apostles’ Creed: I Believe” –**

**Read: Mark 9 :14–32 and/or memorize: Mark 9: 23 – 24 NIV**

Being a dad, I can identify with the dad of our Gospel as much as anyone can. He is a man who loves his son, I know how he feels when his child is sick. He talks about it being an evil spirit, who has possessed him. It sounds he is an epileptic. What is causing this problem doesn’t really matter. He's sick and needs help.

Dad must've heard the neighborhood scuttlebutt about a certain Nazarene rabbi, who was touring the countryside, with a reputation for healing people. He is not quite sure what to make of that, but he will do whatever he needs to do to help his child. He wants to do something, anything, to help him.

He is desperate. Jesus inquires how long the boy has been sick. Dad says that he's been like this since he was a young child. How sad. The man is at a loss. The medical people have given up, except to say, put a stick between his teeth. They have nothing more to offer. The father knows there is nothing more to do. Then he hears about this Jesus.

I am struck by the dad’s stick-to-itiveness. They arrive at the place he's heard Jesus is at, only to find that He's not there. His disciples tell him that the Teacher and three friends are up on the mountain. They're on a retreat. No, they have no idea when he's coming back.

Meanwhile, down in the valley, Jesus’ other friends are in the midst of an argument about obscure theological details with the local religious establishment. Dad interrupts with a plea for help on behalf of his boy. Disciples give it their best shot, but nothing changes.

What does he do now? Might it be that he is tempted to give up go back home? Was this a fool’s errand, dragging the boy from who knows where? But something leads him to stay for a bit, during that time, Jesus returns. And that, as we know, makes all the difference.

There's a little diagnostic conversation: “How long has this been going on for the boy?” Dad replies, “From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him. Have mercy on us and help us, if you can?”

Jesus seems to respond with a sharp reply, "If I can?" There is almost a sense of "How dare you question my ability to handle this!" But I think there is a mis-interpretation. It must be understood in terms of what Jesus said immediately after, "If I can?" Jesus says, "Anything is possible if a person believes."

How true, how true. As it has been said, "To approach anything in the spirit of hopelessness is to make it hopeless; to approach anything in the spirit of faith is to make it a possibility . . ." As one commentator has commented, "Most of us are cursed with a sense of the impossible, and that is precisely why miracles do not seem to happen."

Hear from the father, one of the most powerful responses: "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief." What kept this man waiting for Jesus, listening to the pious know-it-alls argue over some mumbo-jumbo as the world stood to the side, hoping in vain for help? Why did he stay?

It is my contention that the dad stayed because of two words: I believe, expressing his trust. Not as one who had all the answers, as he himself admitted, "help my unbelief." He came because of those two words: I believe. He went home happy that night with the son who was healed because of those two words: "I believe."

The words, "I Believe" are at the heart of everything you or I do. What we believe determines how we behave. When we get up in the morning, we put our feet over the side of the bed and onto the floor in preparation to stand. Why? Because we believe in the law of gravity, and that it is as much a force in the morning as it was when we went to sleep. If we did not believe that, we would likely just stay under the covers.

In interpersonal relationships, if we believe our spouse faithful to us, we think no more about it; if we believe our spouse is unfaithful, that is all we think about. This list is endless. What we believe will determine how we behave!

In fact, what we believe may even determine our level of health. There have been numerous studies done that say that reading the Bible, going to worship and praying regularly can extend your lifespan. A study by Azusa Pacific University found that those who faithfully participated in religious activities lived four years longer than average and were less likely to have high blood pressure, which can reduce the risk of a heart attack or stroke.

While the study does not prove a causal relationship between belief in a higher power and good health, it provides numeric evidence of another benefit of religious activity. Numerous studies have shown that religious people are less inclined to depression, have healthier immune systems, and do better at avoiding addictions than the non-religious.

A woman called her pastor one night and said to him, "What do I believe?" The pastor responded, "What do you mean?" She explained that she had been at a party with a group of people from various different faiths. They were talking about their different beliefs. She said she was the only protestant in the group and frankly, she didn't know what to say.

The pastor, in his conversation with another person said, "That woman must have come into the church by confusion of faith, not confession of faith." But she is not alone. We are living in a time when many people find it hard to explain and articulate what they believe.

Part of our problem is rooted in our celebration of American rugged individualism, and its tendency to speak of personal matters only with deep reluctance. We are also reluctant because many public figures make pious announcements about their personal faith only to be disappointingly human in their actions. We do not want to be tarred with that brush.

But the biggest problem, we must faithfully confess, is that we have just not done the work we need to do. We have not done the work or wrestled with the deep truths of our faith. Saint Peter wrote a long time ago, "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you," but most folks cannot do that if threatened to do so.

What would you say if I asked you, what do you believe? Could you answer that question? I certainly hope you can because I know that you're going to tell me in just a few minutes. When this sermon ends, I will invite you to join in speaking the Apostles Creed. And you will begin by saying, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty . . . You will confess that you believe in Jesus and go on to tell about all the things you believe about Him.

And finally, you will say, "I believe in the Holy Spirit. You will declare that you believe in the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins. Perhaps we need to ask, in good Lutheran fashion, "What does this mean?" Along with the resurrection of the body and life everlasting, with a great big amen at the end, meaning that you believe this is true. So, all in about 100 words, you have proclaimed what you believe.

For you history buffs, who want to know, the beginnings of the creed probably date to the second century of the church. The earliest known written form of the creed is from a letter written in 341 by Marcellus of Ancyra to Julius, the bishop of Rome. The creed's current form developed in the fifth century, and its final form was reached in southwestern France in the late 6th or early 7th century. The early church thought it was written by the Apostles, just after the Ascension, with each contributing a clause, although by the Reformation, most scholars rejected that idea, while still holding to the creed.

The creed does not teach about all that we believe as Christians, but that's not its purpose. The ultimate question then is, how does that belief impact your behavior? If you believe in God the Father, how will it impact your life. If what you believe, determines how you behave, what difference does it make that you believe in a personal God, who is the creator of the whole universe?

How about that you believe in Jesus, His supernatural birth, His sacrifice, resurrection and ascension and that He will return in power. Now what? If what you believe determines your behavior, how will believing in the uniqueness of Jesus change it? What will belief in the Holy Spirit mean for how you as you live out your Christian faith?

As a great preacher said, "You really don't believe the creed until you want to say it standing at spiritual attention with the roll of drums in your ear, the light of love dazzling in your eyes, and all the music of a splendid world crashing out a prelude to its truth."

Does saying I believe mean you understand it all? Absolutely not. God is far beyond our comprehension and we should not base our belief on understanding it all. Faith is accepting and believing without totally understanding.

That is part of the mystery of faith. And like the father in our Gospel, in our moments of doubt, we can speak with him those words: "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief."

Count me in: How will what you believe lead you to act differently toward others?