

## **Struggling with faith**

by The Reverend John William Zehring  
October 30, 2005

Reformation Sunday  
Daylight Savings Time ends  
Sermon Talk Back

TEXTS: Mark 9:17-29  
Psalm 39

MEDITATION: *And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief. (Mark 9:24, KJV)*

### Prayer

You are a thinking people: curious, questioning, intelligent, well-read. When it comes to your faith, you have questions. Some of you struggle with faith, which I suppose all of us do at one time or another.

A woman came to see me about her faith... or, as she put it, her lack of faith. She enjoyed church, liked belonging, cherished the music... but... she told me, she wrestled constantly with her belief in God... or, rather, her lack of belief. She thinks about it constantly. It keeps her awake at night. She's a seeker, a searcher, a questioner.

### Ask, Seek, Knock

There are times I think God must love the searchers best of all, even when in their wrestling with the faith they reject him, argue with him, are mad at him, or they can't imagine he exists the way he's been described to them. It's like a teacher having a child who is never content, who is intensely curious, who is always struggling, searching, sometimes arguing – aren't those the ones you remember, even if they drive you crazy? You care about them... you like them... and somehow, you have a hunch their search will lead them to find.

That's behind Jesus' teaching (Matthew 7:7

*"Ask, and it will be given you;  
search, and you will find;  
knock, and the door will be opened for you.*

The verb tense is the **present imperative** mood of the verb... which means is not to ASK, SEEK, and KNOCK once, but to

**.. keep on asking.**

**.. keep on seeking.**

**.. keep on knocking..**

In my experience of being a pastor, I have never wanted to discourage the seekers... because even though, in their honesty, they don't sound very ORTHODOX... I have a trust that as they keep on seeking, they will find Truth... and Christianity has no fear of the search for Truth.

I was with a man and his wife – long-time members and active leaders of another church I served. She was in the hospital, dying of pancreatic cancer, and was given only days to live. We held hands, prayed, talked, sat together in silence. It was time for him to leave for a little while, so I walked him to his car. As we neared the parking lot, he said to me,

*"John, I hope this won't be an affront to you, but Connie and I don't believe in God... at least, not in the way the church teaches. Oh, we acknowledge that there is some kind of Supreme Being... way off in the distance, but we don't believe in God or Christ in the traditional way. The reason we come to church is for the fellowship, the friendships, the social opportunities."*

I was honored that he felt close enough to me to share these innermost thoughts and, given that his wife of fifty years would not live the week, it didn't seem the time to engage in an intellectual discussion about the existence of God. It also reminded me that there are many people in the church who struggle with faith. Interestingly, sometimes those who are struggling with their faith look around them and think they are the only ones when there may be more than they think.

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Sometimes those who struggle with faith are our young. Do not fear the youthful searching or the bold proclamations of what is not believed. The best thing a church... and parents can do is to love them as they are, accept them, be honest with them, and give them some space to search, to try on new ideas, and to grow. A critical searching and struggling with faith is preferable to apathetic disinterest.

#### The Story of the dad and the demon filled boy

As a people of faith, here at the Kingston Congregational Church, let's realize that there are some among us who struggle and wrestle with faith... as there are times in your life when you have struggled with faith.

Struggling with faith happened in the bible. Today's scripture tell of a faith struggle in a dad who brought his demon-filled boy to Jesus.

This story is told in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Mark begins the story this way:

***Someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so."***

In the days of Jesus, to say that a spirit seized someone referred to an illness like Epilepsy or... in many cases, to mental illness. When they spoke of demons, they were talking about **mental illness**... and even today... if you've had a family member who suffers from mental illness, you know what a demon it is.

#### My boy

I am a dad to my boy with mental illness, so this is a story where I can empathize with the father who brought his boy to Jesus. I am WITH that dad.

Mine was bi-polar disorder with suicidal tendencies. That short diagnosis took years to uncover, although his attempts to kill himself didn't need much diagnosis. Oh the pain he suffered... the terrible dark black holes in which he dwelled. The failure at school, when I knew he was bright. The stigma, the teachers who called him lazy, stupid, undisciplined, a poor attitude. It wasn't his attitude. It was his chemistry set. The depression blew in like a fog across the bay for

no apparent reason. It wasn't triggered by anything – it just came and went. Like Demons. My boy... my beloved son... hurt real bad.

The thinking of the dad

The pain a parent feels when his child hurts... and the helplessness. The man in Mark's account who brought his boy to Jesus may have tried and failed at every possible solution.

- Perhaps he took his boy to the Rabbi, to the Physician, to anyone who might have an idea.
- Perhaps he tried the different drugs, the herbs, the therapies.
- Perhaps he prayed and cried and begged Yahweh to heal his boy. I know the tears this man cried for his boy, when no one was around to see him cry.

And then... he hears talk of this Jesus.

Some say he's the Son of God. A son? THE son?

A few have whispered that he may be *the Messiah*. Doesn't look like a Messiah!

Wouldn't there be more fanfare for the One picked by God to deliver his people?

The father has heard talk about Jesus' parables, of his new teachings about God. Imagine, calling the King of the Universe "*Father*." He's heard about the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders. Who to believe? What to believe?

What's captured his attention...

he's heard that this Jesus has healed people.

Cured the lame, restored sight to the blind, even raised...

well, that's almost beyond belief.

But... what if it's true. Could there be hope for my boy. Could I get through to him... have a moment with him... be bold enough to ask him... to touch my son?

Can you imagine this dad's thinking?

*Can't get my hopes up too high, he thinks to himself.*

*I've been shot down before... disappointed so many times.*

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*Nothing has worked. Maybe nothing will ever work.*

*If he IS the son of God... should I bother him? Wouldn't he have bigger and more important issues to deal with than one man's ill son?*

*I know what I'll do*, the man thinks. I'll go to his disciples. THEY have also healed people. They have performed signs. I'd feel more comfortable approaching them. So, one more time, he gathers up his boy and heads off to one more hope. *What do I have to lose*, he calculates.

He meets with some of the disciples. By now, they are becoming known in their own right as Jesus' disciples. They've been together for two to three years... time for word to spread around the small region.

The disciples agree to try to help.

They raise their hands over the boy, say a prayer, the father holds his breath... and then... and then... **nothing happens.**

I know that feeling. Anything's worth a try, but face it, this isn't going anywhere.

### Meeting with Jesus

Undaunted, this dad will not give up. NOW he's determined to see Jesus. Little did he know that Jesus is fresh off the mountain of Transfiguration... the turning point as Jesus heads to Jerusalem to die. Only Jesus knows at this point that he's got just weeks until the crucifixion... and there's so much work left... so much that will have to be left to the disciples... to carry on his work... and he's not sure they will be able to do it.

Jesus comes to the man's town. Firmly, boldly, the man resolves that he must talk to Jesus to ask Jesus himself to cure his boy. He shoves his way through... he gets his moment... Standing before Jesus himself, the man BLURTS OUT:

***"Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so."***

Ok. The case is made. Now it's in God's hands.

But wait a minute... listen to Jesus' reaction... he says:

*"You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you?*

*How much longer must I put up with you?*

I've researched this and still I'm not completely sure what's going on here. This appears inconsistent with the compassionate and caring Jesus... and usually when something appears inconsistent, there is an explanation. He's not talking here to the dad, but to the whole group... to the generation... and maybe he's beaming his reaction to the disciples. I'm going to have to come back to this another day, but for now, let's move on because Jesus next turns directly to the sick boy's dad and says: "**Bring him to me.**" Oh, those are the words he's been longing to hear. Listen to the text:

*And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth.*

*Jesus asked the father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us."*

Sounds like dialog between physician and patient...

Jesus gathering data about the symptoms.

*PLEASE... the dad pleads, if you are able to do anything...*

Probably not the exact right choice of words to say to Jesus, who comes back with the exclamation:

***"IF you are able!***

***All things can be done for the one who believes."***

*I've offended him, the father thinks. He's not going to heal my boy.*

*One more dashed hope. My best chance and I blew it.*

*NO. Darn it, I will not give up on my boy.*

*I've got to tell him how I feel...*

And here comes the message of the day, in the dad's response. The bible says:

*Immediately the father of the child cried out,  
"I believe; help my unbelief!"*

He's got the mustard seed of faith. Not that he hasn't struggled with his faith, with all he can't understand, with the debates in his mind about why God does or allows what he does, why some, not others, why why why...? It has been a struggling with faith, but he's got just enough faith to say *"I believe; help my unbelief!"*

Which tells Jesus not only does the man possess a mustard seed of faith, but he's affirming that he believes that Jesus himself is able to help the part of him that struggles with belief... the part that doesn't believe. This is a testimony of faith. It is a confession that the dad knows that Jesus is the Son of God... that he would even ask him to help his unbelief... trusting that he could!

The text then explains that Jesus **rebuked the spirit** in the boy and **healed him**...

which we've been rooting for, although not without a little confusion about what it means for God's son to heal some... to step outside the bounds of nature which he created.

Even in the story there is a struggling with scripture, but the message for us is captured by this most powerful of verses... I like it best in the King James Version...

***Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.***

My message today is to not fear the struggle with faith...

and like the dad in the story...

to not give up even when a part of you wrestles with unbelief...

but even to ask Him for help with the unbelief...

To help you to KEEP ON asking... seeking... knocking.

Live into the answers

Poet Rainer Maria Rilke, in his work *Letters To A Young Poet*, expressed this so well. He said...

***Try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language.***

*Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them.*

*And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.*

In your struggle with faith, live the questions...

and may God lead you, perhaps without even noticing it,  
to live your way into the answer.

**Lord, I believe. Help Thou my unbelief.**

Amen.