

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
March 10, 2019

Still with Us
Luke 9:37-45

Last Sunday we were on the mountaintop, caught up in the glow and glory of the Lord. Today we've descended to more familiar surroundings. After a worshipful retreat with a few key leaders, Jesus now encounters the crowds again. He's back on the streets and in the neighborhoods, facing the pressures and demands of daily ministry, surrounded by desperate pleas for help.

One of them comes from a man whose only child, a son, is possessed by a demon. Like any loving parent, this father does whatever he needs to do to get help for his child. He has already reached out to Jesus' disciples, but for whatever reason, they were unable to heal the boy. So now the father goes up the ranks, from the followers to the leader, the "Teacher," (v. 38) to try and get results.

Jesus' first reaction is frustration and exasperation, with a good dose of judgment mixed in. "O unbelieving and perverse generation" (v. 41). Jesus' response echoes the words of Moses, who had to deal with God's faithless and disobedient people in the wilderness. But Jesus takes it a little further. He goes on to say that he's starting to run out of patience. "How long shall I stay with you and put up with you?" Eugene Peterson, in his idiomatic translation, does a good job of capturing Jesus' tone: "What a generation! No sense of God! No focus to your lives! How many times do I have to go over these things? How much longer do I have to put up with this? Bring your son here."¹

Though Jesus is talking to the father, he's talking to more than just the father. He's addressing the larger gathering. The whole crowd needs to hear what Jesus is saying, including, and especially, his own disciples. After all, their inability to heal the boy is the reason this case ended up in Jesus' hands.

And why couldn't the disciples pull it off? It's not as if Jesus had sent them out to fail. On the contrary, he had already given them power and authority over demons and diseases. And thus far they had experienced a lot of success in their mission. As they traveled from town to town, people were responding to the gospel. The captives were being set free. The sick were being healed. But this time things were different. Here was a demon, a disease, that wouldn't take orders from the disciples. Why?

Maybe all their ministry success had gone to the disciples' heads. Maybe they had grown self-satisfied and complacent. Maybe they had slacked up in their prayer lives. Maybe they had neglected spending time in community and practicing other basic spiritual disciplines that helped them stay connected to the power of Jesus. Or maybe, as one commentator has suggested, Jesus' announcement that he's headed toward suffering and death has weakened their faith or shaken their commitment to him. Maybe they think that because Jesus is on a path that leads to crucifixion, his power and authority, as well as theirs, have been diminished.²

But that's clearly not the case, considering what happens next. Jesus heals the boy, gives him back to his father, and the whole crowd breaks out in worship. So the Spirit of the Lord is still on Jesus, just as much now as it was at the beginning of his ministry. And yet,

before all the hallelujahs have even died down, Jesus looks at his disciples and reminds them, once again, that his sights are set on the cross. "Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men" (v. 44).

So here's an all-powerful Messiah who sounds like he's going to be powerless against those who will crucify him. This apparent contradiction leaves the disciples confused, cautious, and questioning. How is it that the one who is mighty to save keeps talking about not being able to save himself? Which one is he? Is he the Jesus that some of them experienced on the mountaintop, radiant in heavenly glory, or is he the Jesus who will be stretched out in earthly suffering and humiliation on the cross?

What Jesus wants them, and us, to know is that he's both. His power and his powerlessness go together. He has authority over all the things that seek to destroy life, hinder human flourishing, and separate us from God. His miraculous deeds are a sign of this, and a pointer to the life of the world to come. But Jesus exercises his authority most of all in letting go of his life and dying for our redemption. What looks like powerlessness is actually God's mighty act to save us. Jesus is the Messiah, but he has to work at reshaping our definition of what a Messiah should be and do.

That's why Jesus repeatedly announces his approaching suffering and death. After the trip to the mountaintop and the healing of the demon-possessed boy, the next major section of Luke's Gospel shows how Jesus continues to bear with his disciples, faithfully teaching them and trying to open their eyes and their minds to what kind of Savior he is, and to how the work and will of God will be accomplished. "O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you and put up with you?" Follow the unfolding story in Luke's Gospel, and in our own lives, and you see how Jesus' answers that question with his patience and perseverance.

The good news is that Jesus is still in the business of redeeming and teaching and transforming flawed disciples. Remember that in today's text, Jesus steps in where his own disciples had failed. It wasn't the first time they had failed, and it certainly wouldn't be the last. In their encounter with the demon-possessed boy, we see the disciples' lack of power. And as one commentator points out, in the scenes that follow, we also see their lack of understanding, their lack of humility, and their lack of sympathy. No wonder it takes Luke nine chapters to narrate the journey to Jerusalem. Jesus has a lot of work to do in challenging and changing his followers.³

We can look back at our own struggles to follow the way of the cross and see how much we've needed the grace of Christ just to make it this far. When you and I retrace our personal stories of discipleship, we recall those times and experiences that leave us asking, "I claim to be a follower of Jesus, and I actually did that?" Or, "I left that undone." Or, "I thought that, or said that." Or, "Why couldn't I see that, or understand that?" What if your own failings, and my own failings at following Jesus, were compiled the way that those first disciples got their flaws and mistakes woven into the story of Jesus?

On Friday, SpaceX completed the historic test flight of a capsule that can be used to launch American astronauts into space from American soil, instead of having to rely on Russian rockets to carry Americans to the International Space Station. To those who follow space flight, it was a major event. But behind such a success were plenty of failures as well. In fact, a couple of years ago SpaceX published a video compilation of all its failures. The video was titled, "How Not to Land an Orbital Rocket Booster," and was set to the song "The Liberty Bell" by John Philip Sousa. It was essentially a series of clips of impressive rocket explosions. The video ends, however, with triumphant footage of the company's first two successful landings.

When it comes to knowing our Lord and being fashioned in his image, what if a video were compiled of your own flawed attempts at discipleship, titled "How Not to Follow Jesus"? Which moments, experiences, and events from your life would be included? That's hard to think about, isn't it? But help and hope come from knowing that there's more to the story than just your failings, whether they came about from your own sins or simply from circumstances beyond your control. Though your own faith may have faltered, our Lord did not. And the progress you've made in following Jesus, and staying on the way of the cross, is the result of his patience and his redeeming presence.

In one of his sermons, preacher John Claypool says:

I heard once of an Italian peasant woman who happened to bump into a monk who lived in a monastery high on a hill above her village. Since she bumped into him in the middle of the road, she said "Father, I've always wanted to ask somebody what you men of God do up there on the top of the mountain that looks to me to be so close to heaven. I've always wondered about the life of holiness that you lead up there."

And this old man, a wise and honest interpreter, said, "What do we men of God do up there on the holy mountain? I'll tell you, my dear. We fall down; we get up. We fall down; we get up. We fall down; we get up."

That is the way of all Christian growth. It doesn't happen all at once. But it does happen when we glimpse what we have not yet achieved, and we want that so badly that we honestly say, "Here's where I am. I'm not going to try to get myself together and then ask God to move me to the goal. I'm going to ask God to come into this moment. It's the only hope of ever making it to that high range of development."⁴

Last Sunday, we were on the mountaintop with Jesus. But even there, his disciples were far from perfect. Recall that Peter wanted to build shelters, so they could stay safe and comfortable. That way they could enjoy the glory without having to endure the suffering. But once again, where Peter fell down, God helped him get up. They all, including our Lord himself, came back down the mountain and into the trials and testings of life headed toward the cross. As St. Augustine challenged Peter in one of his sermons: "Come down, Peter! You were eager to go on resting on the mountain; come down! Toil away, sweat it out, suffer some tortures, so that by means of the brightness and beauty of right and good activity, you may come to possess in charity what is to be understood by the Lord's white garments."⁵

The places and circumstances where we grow in our relationship with our Lord often seem far away from the mountain where his radiance was displayed. But we know what he has already shown us. We know that the glory of God has been revealed in Jesus Christ, including his suffering and death. Our Lord is still opening our eyes and our minds to what that means and what kind of Savior he is. He's still teaching us how we ourselves should live as cross bearers. He's still showing up with power when we're powerless. He's still helping us get up when we fall. He's still coming to us with patient mercy, taking our flaws and failings and working them into his good purposes.

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993) 142.

² Fred Craddock, *Luke*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox, 1990) n. p.

³ Craddock, *Luke*, n.p.

⁴ John Claypool, "You Don't Have to Be Good to Come to Christ." Preaching Today, Tape No. 83.

⁵ Homily 78.6, quoted in Michael Kibbe, "Christ's Transfiguration Is a Sneak Preview of Our Future." Christianity Today website. June 21, 2017. Accessed March 7, 2019 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/july-august/transfiguration-as-much-about-humanity-as-divinity.html>>.