

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

The beginning of our Gospel text might sound a bit confusing without knowing what immediately precedes this text. Indeed, the “they” who come to the disciples in our text are Jesus along with Peter, James, and John. They had just come down from the Mount of Transfiguration where Jesus had been transfigured before them and had held “converse high” with Moses and Elijah.

Jesus’ other disciples, of course, stayed below, and in the meantime, a man — a father — had come to them and implored their help. He wanted them to cast out the deaf and mute spirit that was afflicting his son. However, much to the disappointment of the father, but to the glee of the scribes, who were there to witness it, the disciples were unable to do it. Our text says the scribes were arguing with the disciples — with a bit of scoffing, I can imagine.

That’s when the crowd saw Jesus and thronged him with amazement and joy. That’s when we learn from the father’s own mouth of the affliction of his son. He had an unclean spirit that would make the boy mute; it would seize him, throw him down to the ground, throw him into the fire or water; it would make him rigid and make him writhe on the ground; it would make him foam at the mouth and grind his teeth. Indeed, when the boy was brought to Jesus, the spirit attacked the boy in just this way, hurling him to the ground.

And after a bit of a conversation with the boy’s father, Jesus cast out the unclean spirit and ordered him never to return. The boy was restored.

Now this text doesn’t apply to us so much, I submit, because of the unclean spirit. I just don’t think that unclean spirits afflict us so much today, although I suppose it could be that we’re just blind to their influence. But I’ve never encountered anyone who was possessed by an unclean spirit — not that I want to do battle with the devil’s front-line troops, either.

Don’t get me wrong. I know that we battle not just against flesh and blood, but “*against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*” I know that devils do continue to fill the world, that this world’s prince does still scowl fierce as he will. But I’ve never had to battle face to face against a demon afflicting a person.

So, for me, it’s not so much the talk of the unclean spirit that I’m drawn to, but the challenge to faith—to the disciples’ faith by the scoffing scribes, so that Jesus would say to the disciples, “*O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?*”—to the father’s faith by the disciples’ inability to cast the demon out, so that the father would say to Jesus, “*if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.*”

That's who we are — people of faith. We're *sola gratia, sola fide* people — by grace alone through faith alone people. From our weekly confession: “*I believe in one God the Father Almighty ... and in one Lord Jesus Christ ... I believe in the Holy Spirit,*” — it's a statement of faith—to our formal confession: “*Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. By His death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight.*” — we are faith people.

Yet, how many times has our faith been rocked? By unexpected disaster? By national tragedies? By personal affliction? By shocking and untimely deaths? By disappointment in a fellow believer? By seemingly unanswered prayers—or by a God who takes too long to answer prayers?

It's in answer to all of these doubts that Jesus enters into our life and answers our “*if you can,*” with “*All things are possible for one who believes.*” All things are possible for him who puts his trust in the Lord, who says, “*You are my God,*” who cries out, “*save me in your steadfast love,*” who courageously waits for the Lord.

The father cried out to Jesus in his wavering faith, “*I believe; help my unbelief!*” Or to rephrase his answer, he asks Jesus in his doubts, “*Lord, I believe, but do I believe enough?*” After all, it takes only the faith as little as a grain of mustard seed to be able to move a mountain. Do I have that kind of faith? Do I have the faith to cast out demons?

Well it seems to me, that's thinking wrongly about faith. Faith is not so much a thing that does but a thing that receives. Jesus didn't say to the father, “*Here, I'll strengthen your faith so that you can cast out the unclean spirit yourself.*” No, with the father's cry for mercy, “*Help my unbelief,*” Jesus Himself proceeded to command the unclean spirit to come out of the boy and never enter again. And it did. Jesus didn't wait until this father's faith met some high enough threshold before He healed his son. The father's faith didn't do it. Jesus did the hard lifting; the father got his faith strengthened as he witnessed the Son of God do what not even disciples could do.

The same is true for us. Yes, we are faith people. We have been saved by grace through faith, we confess. But, it's important for us to remember, it's not our faith that does but our faith that receives. When Jesus says elsewhere, “*your faith has saved you,*” He's talking about this kind of faith, a faith that trusts in Him, in His work, in His words.

For your faith did not atone for sins. Jesus did. The One who “*set [His] face like a flint*” toward Jerusalem, toward Zion, toward Golgotha did. The One who

“gave [His] back to those who strike” did. The One who gave His “cheeks to those who pull out the beard,” did. The One who “hid not [His] face from disgrace and spitting” did. The One who humbled Himself and endured the shame of the cross did. The One who was vindicated by cross and resurrection did. The One whose blood sacrifice propitiated the sins of the world did.

And He did it even though neither His disciples’ faith nor your faith were big as a mustard seed, big enough to move mountains, or big enough to cast out demons. He did it not only to atone for your sins, but also, like the father in our Gospel lesson, that your faith in Him, who could do such a marvelous thing, might be strengthened in its hearing.

Moreover, Jesus gives the fruit of what He did in His sacrifice to us in more things that He does, in His sacraments. He does it not because deserve it, because our faith is so strong, but precisely because we who are weak in faith need help in our unbelief. And so He cleanses us by water and His word and gives us salvation; He gives His Holy Spirit and calls us to faith; He invites us to daily contrition and repentance; He forgives us our sins and gives us His righteousness; He feeds us with the meal of His body and blood. And our faith doesn’t effect any of this—remember faith is not the doer, but the receiver.

And that’s not to say that faith is unimportant; it is. It’s essential to acknowledge that Christ has done it all already; our faith is essential to receive His goodness — God’s grace, whereby our faith is strengthened; and we are assured of life in Him.

So, thanks be to God, for Jesus who CAN do all things DOES all this freely, without any merit or worthiness in us. With God all things are possible, so yes, He CAN. But more than that, He wills it. He wants to do it. He wants you to be saved. He wants you to live in faith. He wants you to live in the forgiveness of sins. He wants to raise you up on the last day. He wants you to come unto Him when you’re weary. He wants you to cry out in your weakness, “*I believe; Lord, help my unbelief.*” He will strengthen your faith and give you rest.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.