

***Jesus said to him, "If you can believe, all things are possible..."
Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears,
"Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!"***

Mark 9:23,24

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The human mind *craves* clarity.

It wants things to be neat & tidy...

- it prefers to think in black & white, rather than in shades of gray
or ambiguity...

As a result, we tend to draw lines in the sand:

- here's what I believe, and don't believe...
- here's what I'm prepared to do and say, and not prepared to do and
say...
- it's my final answer
- end of story

It's what you could call a "fixed mindset," one that rushes to a conclusion
because we're hoping, assuming, praying, that we won't have to re-visit
that particular issue or challenge anymore....

But that's not really how life works, is it...

There are very few issues and challenges in life that can be solved in
"one sitting"

...solved so that we never have to re-visit them again.

Now, of course, there are "black & white" decisions that need to be made in life...

Do we believe in God, or not?

Do we believe in the Word, in the Sacred Scriptures and the Heavenly Doctrines, or not?

Do we believe in heaven, in hell, in angels and devils, in an afterlife, or not?

We need to decide...

But the point of today's sermon is that our faith journey doesn't follow a nice, neat, straight path (no matter how much we'd like it to)

- rather, it takes a much more "circuitous" route
 - sometimes we feel strong in our faith
 - sometimes we feel weak
 - sometimes we have clarity on what we believe
 - sometimes we lack clarity

And while it's true that we need to make decisions about what we believe and don't believe...

our faith *also* needs time to grow and mature.

It needs time to flex
to doubt
to question
to wait...

This is important because our faith, our belief system, shouldn't ever be *rushed* or *compelled* if it is to *truly* become our own (DP 129ff).

And the teachings of our church are very clear on this point...

- faith is a personal thing
- we need to make it our own
- and not base it on the say-so of parents, teachers, or ministers
(HD 318)

- but on what we have freely chosen to believe (which often happens after hard and bitter experiences that challenge us to our core)

The recitation from the Gospel of Matthew (7:24-27) that we recited together this morning makes this point...

We build our "house," our faith, on the rock (truth) by hearing the Lord's sayings and then *doing* them...

- but again, this takes time, a lifetime in fact, with the "wind," and "rain" and "floods" of hardship and turmoil forming our faith.

This is why the father's humble confession, "*Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!*" (Mark 9:24) is so important for us to explore and understand.

It introduces the idea that faith is not an "all or nothing" proposition.

We can believe *and* doubt.

We can accept what the Lord tells us in His Word *and* question it.

There's room for both...

This certainly squares with our own experience...

Each of us are strong in certain aspects of our New Church faith and weak in other areas

- and that's okay because..., as one teaching says,

"...a state of disbelief is preferable to having faith at one point and then departing from it" (AC 5508).

And the point is this - having doubts is not a sign of weakness or laziness or a matter of not trying hard enough...

The Lord expects us to waver in our faith.

Why else would He say in the Scriptures over and over again, "*O you of little faith*"

This isn't a condemnation - it's a statement about the human condition

- it's a merciful, loving acknowledgement of our ongoing, daily *struggle* with faith,

...where we *want* to believe...but have our doubts!

This test of faith gets played out in all sorts of ways...

- in our temptations/trials
- during the work of repentance (battling our own demons)
- during times of poor health and sickness
- when we're depressed, disheartened, uncertain about the future

Point? Like the father in our story, we struggle to believe the Lord can perform a miracle in our lives. Listen again to the three reasons why *faith in the Lord* healed the sick in New Testament times:

1st - it was because they acknowledged that He was God.

2nd - it was because they acknowledged His presence.

3rd - it was because they acknowledged His omnipotence or power.

(AE 815:3,5).

Let's look closer at the father's exchange with the Lord in our story from the gospel of Mark...

We can picture the years of mental anguish, torture in that home...

- suffering of the father as he helplessly watches his son's torment
- his body convulsing uncontrollably
- thrown to the ground by the deaf and mute spirit that has taken control of him
- must have been terrifying to witness...
- no doubt the father felt powerless to do anything about it

Then the Lord says, "*If you can believe, all things are possible...*"

To which the father replies, "*Lord I believe; help my unbelief.*"

In our reading today, we learned about *positive* and *negative* doubt (AC 2568).

It's a curious phrase, isn't it - positive doubt? How can doubt be a *positive* thing? Our brain wants it to be one or the other - either we doubt something or affirm it. How can we do both?

But we read:

"There are those who are in doubt before they deny, and there are those who are in doubt before they accept affirmatively..." (Ibid)

So what distinguishes positive doubt from negative doubt?

It has to do w/the spiritual influences we open ourselves up to...

Those in **negative doubt** are "*disposed toward a life of evil*" which, if left unchecked, causes people to **deny** spiritual matters,
 - to deny anything that has to do with the things we can't see or touch w/our physical senses - everything to do w/religion - Lord, heaven, hell, faith, charity, etc.

Point? Negative doubt opens us up to the sphere of evil spirits...

"The evil spirits present with us and who are the cause of temptation, do all they can to infuse a negative outlook..." (AC 2338).

Whereas,

Those in **affirmative doubt** are "*disposed toward a life of good.*" They allow themselves to be turned to that life by the Lord, which causes them to **accept** spiritual matters.

Well, we can safely assume that the healing miracle in our story today worked because the father, although he had his doubts, nevertheless believed that the

Lord had the power to do the seemingly impossible, namely cast the demon out of his son (see AE 815).

This brings us to our main point: disbelief only becomes harmful when we let our doubts turn negative (AC 2568)

- when we get swept up by strong, negative influences
- when we permit the loud, impatient voices in and around us to adopt an "all or nothing" mindset.

This negative, rigid mindset is what the deaf and mute spirit represents.

Think of what this spirit did to the boy:

- threw him to the ground (into danger, fire & water), making him foam at mouth & gnash his teeth, becoming rigid, immobilized

We're taught that the deaf and mute spirit represents those who are...

"unwilling to perceive and understand truth" (AE 556:17).

Spiritually speaking,

- to be "deaf" means to be unwilling to hear the truth
- to be "mute" means to be unwilling to articulate the truth

This is where negative doubt comes from - evil spirits as it were "throw us to the ground," immobilize us, make us...

- "deaf" toward the beautiful truths of the Lord in His second coming
- "mute" or unwilling to speak those truths, give them a voice

When we permit negative doubt, or cynicism or arrogance to pollute the mind...

we open ourselves up to *"a very strong sphere of disbelief"* toward spiritual matters (AC 5573:3) which, if left unchecked,

...runs the risk of making us focus only on this world, on external, superficial matters (see AC 4464).

When we say, "*Lord, I believe; help my unbelief*"

- we are keeping our mind and heart open to possibilities
- we are keeping our doubting mind positive
- we are entertaining the idea that "*all things are possible*" (Mark 9:23).
- and we are not dismissing the "impossible" out of hand

Think about it: we severely limit and diminish the Lord when we say,

"This won't work"
"That won't happen"

Like the father in this story,

- we want help with what troubles us
- we want help with what doesn't make sense

The point of today's sermon has been that our faith journey doesn't follow a nice, clear, predictable path...

- rather, it takes a much more "circuitous" route
 - sometimes we feel strong in our faith
 - sometimes we feel weak
 - sometimes we have clarity, sometimes we don't
 - and that this is okay, and part of the Lord's plan

Let us remember that our faith needs time to grow and mature. It needs time...

to flex
 to doubt
 to question

to wait...

- in order to become strong
- in order to become our own (DP 129ff).

So when you feel challenged to the core...

ask the Lord to help you with your unbelief

- with that difficult person at work
- with that challenge at home
- with that friend or loved who needs your help
- with that sense that you've failed
- or with that hard saying in the Word

It's all in our mindset,

in being willing to wait,

in being willing to change our mind,

in being willing to believe that the Lord has the power to do what seems impossible.

*Jesus said to him, "If you can believe, all things are possible..."
Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears,
"Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!"*

AMEN.