



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

13025 Bell Air Drive, Auburn, CA 95603 (530) 823-3916 auburnpres@gmail.com

“Healed Unbelief” Mark 9:14-29

Tonight, and each time we gather, we open God’s Word to learn something more about God’s healing. Tonight, we hear a story about an epileptic boy—a story of failure to heal, and of at least two kinds of healing.

Please find Mark’s gospel, chapter 9, starting at verse 14. Before we begin reading 9:14 through 29, I want to take a moment to point out the context of this incident. What happened before this encounter? Jesus, James, Peter and John had been up on a mountain, where Jesus had been “metamorphosed”, to use the literal Greek word—transfigured, radically changed in appearance. It was Jesus, but clearly more than the Jesus they knew. Still dazzled by that awesome display of God’s glory given to Jesus, and God’s vocal order to “listen to my Son”, these three disciples who formed Jesus’ inner circle come down the mountain with him. In verses 9-13 they have a bit of a theological debate, for these three men have had a vision of the triumphant Christ, a preview of his Second Coming in glory and power. So they might be thinking the end of the age has come. But they are confused about this, too. Wasn’t Elijah the prophet supposed to come first, to point to God’s Messiah? Jesus answered them, saying, in effect, “That happened already, in John the Baptizer. And look what happened to him, God’s prophet—beheaded in prison. Can we expect it to be any different for the Son of Man?” I’m not sure how much of this the disciples understood, since they seemed to be operating with a “divine warrior” model of Messiah, like most everyone else in that time. Jesus’ words here point to a defeat—for the Elijah come again, and for God’s Messiah. I don’t think they could process that, yet.

And now here’s the focus story. When I was a kid, one of the favorite kinds of puzzles I enjoyed working on when the family was traveling in the car was a “find the figures in the drawing”. You know, “How many squirrels can you find in this drawing?” As you hear this account, see if you can spot multiple healings happening here. Listen for God’s Word TO US TONIGHT, as I read these words aloud from Mark 9:14-29. *[text]*

Almost never do we have Mark’s version of a story running longer than the Matthew and/or Luke version of a story, but that’s what we have here. This story might have been more important to Mark and his church audiences than for the later evangelists, I don’t know.

Did you spot the multiple healings?

First, of course, there is the failure. Jesus and the “big 3” have walked down the mountain, and right into a failure. A man has brought his epileptic son to Jesus’ disciples, and they couldn’t cure him. Certainly that reflects badly on the disciples—and then, too, on Jesus himself.

Jesus seems exasperated, as if this case was not all that difficult. When Jesus turns to the boy, the spirit behind these fits attacks the boy, as if to get in one more lick before he is bound and cast out by the superior power of Jesus. It's quite a violent display, and Jesus draws back, a bit surprised. I like this next part—he has a side conversation with the father. “How long has he been like this?” Jesus asks sympathetically—this must have been tough on you and your family. Like, forever—since he was a kid, the father says. It's been awful; it's all we can do to keep the boy from hurting himself. If you can, please cure him.

“If you can?!” Jesus smiles, with utmost confidence and poise. “All things are possible to him who believes.”

Immediately—one of Mark's favorite words—immediately the father sinks to his knees and says, I believe; help my unbelief!” Now perhaps Jesus was about to speak directly to this man's desire to trust him fully, but a crowd is gathering, and Jesus won't be able to address this man alone. Instead, Jesus proceeds directly to expel the bedeviling spirit and prohibit that spirit from returning. With one last convulsion, the spirit departs, and the poor boy—probably a young adult by now—is left so exhausted that he looks dead to everyone who has just gathered. But no; Jesus raises him up—perhaps a preview of his own resurrection by the power of God.

The disciples can't wait to get a word with Jesus. They are desperate to know why they failed to cast out the demon. Jesus says, “This kind comes out only with prayer.”

There is so much here. Life following Jesus will have failures in it; we won't be living up to our potential at times. We shouldn't get discouraged if everyone we talk to about Jesus doesn't immediately fall on their knees and ask to become a follower. We shouldn't take it personally if someone with whom we minister does not immediately improve. It's not “our fault” if someone for whom we are praying does not receive the blessing we seek. All these discouragements are based on a false premise—as if WE were the evangelists instead of the Holy Spirit, as if WE were the healers instead of The Great Physician, our Lord Jesus, as if WE had magic in our prayers that coerced God into granting blessings. Do you hear the “divorce” between God and us that is assumed by these things? Each mistake focuses on what WE do, as if God gave us orders to heal—which he did—and we were about His business doing what he told us to do. It's as though God sent us a letter from a distant country with orders to evangelize, heal and ask for blessings, but God ceased being involved once he “wrote” us our orders. Baloney! Doing what God wants is not a message from afar; it's a message up-close, as we listen to God here and now for how God wants to evangelize and heal and grant blessings, and then coming alongside what God is doing already. Do you get this difference? This is VERY important!

In our story, there is failure, but there is also faith. And it doesn't have to be a lot of faith, apparently, in Jesus as the healer. Give Jesus a little opening, and he will drive a Mack truck through that, with a joyful laugh in the devil's face! Sometimes well-meaning Christians will try to perform a healing, and if nothing happens (that they can see, right away), they will suggest that the suffering client has defective faith. “You don't believe enough.” Ba-loney. A “single mustard seed” sized faith is plenty—not to cause God to come through, but to give God an opportunity to come through and receive glory and gratitude. In the end, it's not about our faith; once again, it's about God's grace. When we don't see a healing, we should say, “I don't know why you were not healed. Let's keep looking.” We give our “after-care cards” to those with whom we minister, to encourage this “keep looking”, “keep praying”, “keep coming back”. Persistence in prayer is a big theme with Jesus, and if so-called “stubborn cases” require

stubborn prayers that don't give up, how much more glory God gets when He does perform a healing, often in a way we did not expect.

There is failure here, there is also faith—oh, yes—and multiple healings. The boy gets healed, right? But doesn't the father, also, get healed? When we use the term "healing", we tend to limit our vision to painful or limiting physical or emotional conditions. But if someone comes to trust Jesus for salvation, isn't that healing? The word for salvation and the word for healing are virtually the same in Greek. Yes, there are multiple healings here—at least two we can identify, and perhaps others in the crowd who have gathered. And perhaps some disciples who have been given another chance to get it straight about how much power they have, vs. how much power God has, and who does what healing. That's a healing, in itself, to see things rightly—I think.

Well, there's more to work on in this text, but that's perhaps enough for tonight. Our hope here is to keep expanding our limited notions of healing, and make them as wide as all of life. Life without God is sickness, defined, isn't it?

It's all about God, and God's grace. Prayer is the way we come to God for His power to heal as He directs. Even demons are subject to Jesus' followers, in his powerful name, we see in Luke 10:17. So with that confidence that depends utterly upon God, we minister in Jesus' Name—not just saying "Jesus", as if that "Name" were magic. No, to take the "Name of Jesus" is to have such a living, right-now connection with God that we know God's will and move as God is moving—not faster—to make His will be done on earth as it is in heaven .

To God be the glory! Always!

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on May 18, 2007 for the Healing Service, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]