

August 31, 2014

TEXT: Mark 9:14-29

TITLE: I Believe in Jesus, but...

The question is asked: What should I do to lead a Christian life? The bible answers that question in several places. For example, the New Testament reading we heard from Romans 12 gives a long list describing the life of believers: *Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; contribute to the needs of the saints, extend hospitality to strangers;* and so on. If that's too general, there's the long parable at the end of Matthew 25: *I was hungry and you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me something to drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you gave me clothing, sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.* That may still feel like too long a list, so Jesus, at the Last Supper, condensed everything down to one, new commandment found in John 13: *Love one another. As I have loved you, you should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*

At some point, though, the focus shifted from how we live our life with others to how we live our lives by ourselves. Christian faith became equated with morality. Suddenly being Christian was less about the love we show and more about the long list of things we are not supposed to do. If you're a Christian, now you're told you can't smoke, you can't drink, you can't say cuss words, you can't wear white pants after Labor Day. Over the years, we just kept adding things to the "Do not do" list. As a Christian, you can't ever do drugs, be an addict, look at porn, be divorced or gay, be a felon or depressed or have suicidal thoughts. We ignored what Christians are supposed to do, as described in Romans 12, Matthew 25, and John 13, and only focused on a checklist of what not to do as our standard for Christian faith.

Which means we end up with a whole lot of people like Gladys in the world, who confess, "I love Jesus, but (blank) – I drink a little, I smoke, I cuss, I mess up." That's a hard place to be in. It's hard to look in the mirror of faith and say to yourself, "I love Christ, but I do this or that so that must mean I am not a real Christian." In that moment, you're like the epileptic boy who 90% of the time is a good kid but all that is negated as soon as he has a seizure that everyone can see. When our faults become public, we are filled with shame and felt distant from God and everyone else. And even if our sins are private, they fill us with fear because how could people respect us if they knew our secrets – if they knew who we really are? Like Gladys, we say "I love Jesus, but I also do this..." So we feel outside the church and distant from God.

When statements like that emerge in counseling sessions, I'll often ask the person "Whom do you hear speaking those words of disapproval to you?" Who is saying, "You have no worth in God's eyes because you drink, you smoke, you're not successful, you're not morally pure and perfect"? Sometimes they'll tell me

that they learned this lesson in church or read it somewhere in the bible. Now friends, I love y'all but, bless your hearts, you don't listen to 90% of what is said in church or really know everything that's in the bible. More than likely it wasn't the church that told you "don't do this" or "don't do that." It likely wasn't the church that said, "Stop doing that or you'll go blind" – it was more than likely some kid on the playground or a very misguided camp counselor or your crazy aunt Zelda. And even if by chance you did hear something like that from the pulpit, the bottom line is that most, if not all of humanity, exists on the wrong side of that moral equation – smoking, drinking, cussing, cavorting, lying, full of shame for what they've done or fearful that they'll have an "epileptic" episode in front of everyone so that the world will know the truth about them and know they're not good Christians.

Let's be honest: there are some things you can do that undermine whether or not you truly love Jesus. To say, "I love Jesus, but I hate (blank) – I hate the Irish or Turks or immigrants or Jews or Muslims" – are contradictory statements. To claim to love Jesus but to be guided by passions that are abusive, violent, or wish the destruction of others, those two phrases cannot be logically combined. But that's an extreme case. What about the vast majority of us who seek to be faithful, but at times feel unworthy to be called Christian for a variety of reasons? A reporter interviewed a homeless man who had finally found a permanent place to stay. The man said, "I'm constantly in terror of going back on the street. It's like being on a glass staircase. No matter how far up I get, when I look down, I see all the way to the bottom."¹ Too many people, too many of us, feel like they're walking up glass staircases – that they are not worthy of God's love because they fall short of what somebody told them is expected as a follower of Christ. That's a real problem for us as the church.

In addition to Gladys' famous phrase, "I love Jesus, but..." there's another famous phrase included in today's gospel lesson – the phrase which the man says to Jesus, "I believe; help my unbelief." It's a juxtaposition of faith and doubt – I believe, yet I have unbelief too. That sounds contradictory too – either you believe in Jesus or you don't, right? No. The opposite of doubt is not faith. The opposite of doubt is certainty. "I don't know what 2+2 is... 2+2 is 4." Faith is something different. It is not about possessing knowledge and wisdom with absolute certainty. Faith is the attitude you have and the relationships you have while you grapple with both doubt and certainty. Think of it this way: You jump into a small lake and want to swim to the other side. It is something you've done before, so you are confident you can swim this far – but you don't know for certain that you'll reach the other side, neither do you know for certain what is below you as you swim across the water's surface. Or perhaps you're hiking in the woods along a trail that is reasonably easy to follow. There are painted marks on the trees to show you the way and there are no huge obstacles you have to overcome to reach the trail's end. But you never know for certain that you'll be successful in your hike. You could get lost or possibly hurt along the way.

Faith is the water in which you swim, as you navigate both certainties and doubts. Faith is the woods in which you walk, trusting there is a way forward even when you can't guarantee the safety of journey in advance. Everyone who has faith also has some doubts. Everyone who believes also has times of unbelief. That's because faith includes doubt. Only if you have questions, if you've not absolutely sure of where you're going or how you'll get there, are you able to trust in God. Only through admitting our doubts and wrestling with them can we ultimately grow in our faith in Christ. Bible scholar William Barclay said "the cure for doubt is not to push it into the back of your mind and refuse to think about it. The cure for doubt is to think a way through the doubts. We gain a more secure faith when we don't turn back from thinking too soon."²

Notice that when the father spoke to Jesus, he didn't use Gladys' phrase. He didn't say, "Lord, I believe, but I also have some unbelief." He didn't approach Jesus afraid that he had fallen short of the moral standards and requirements of faith and thus was unworthy of Christ's attention. He told the truth about himself in a simple prayer: "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief." He was a desperate father worried about his son who had both faith and doubt in his heart. But, he was wise enough to know that he could come to Christ exactly like that. He didn't listen to the crazy voices in his head that warned him away from the church because he drank a little, smoked a little, cussed or lied or doubted or sinned a little. He had faith enough to know that he was not outside the care or love of God. What was true for him is true for every one of us. That father's short prayer is also our prayer, if we're honest with ourselves. "I believe; help my unbelief."

What was Jesus' answer? Right then, the boy had a seizure in front of Jesus and looked like a corpse. (Bear in mind, this story is written to a young Christian community who had seen Jesus taken down from a cross and seen his corpse placed in a tomb. This boy's "resuscitation" story was one way to help the early Christian church understand the larger-yet-similar resurrection that happened to Jesus and which is promised to all God's people.) When the boy had his seizure, vs. 27 says, "Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up and he was able to stand." In our lives of belief/ unbelief, the answer we need to hear does not come from our ability to lead lives of Christian certainty, abstinence and moral purity. The answer we need comes from taking the hand of Jesus, who lifts us up, heals us, loves us and is with us as we walk by faith amidst doubts and certainties, joys and sorrows, mountain-top and valley of the shadow of death journeys.

And at the end of the story, when the disciples asked why they failed to cast out the demon, Jesus replied, "This kind can come out only through prayer," he wasn't suggesting that they had prayed wrong before. It was never a matter of their own holiness being the source that would heal the boy. It was always about living a life of faith praying to and in relationship with the One who alone is holy, whose grace is made perfect in our weakness, whose power lifts us up from all our catatonic states and epileptic seizures and sets us free at last.

Neither Gladys nor the epileptic boy's father nor you or I need see ourselves as we are reflected in the world's moralistic eyes. Our self-examination and life of faith always begins by seeing ourselves reflected in the eyes of Christ. In that loving glance from our Savior, then we know what we are to do and how we are to live wherever the journey of life takes us. Then Gladys' phrase becomes, "I love Jesus, and..."

¹ Melanie Rehak article with Lars Eicher, *New York Times Magazine*, March 7, 1999.

² William Barclay, *Christian Ministry*, July/August 1996, p. 44.