

SMALL GROUP MATERIAL

EMBRACING THE UNCERTAIN

LENT 2021

WEEK 1

Question 1 – Introducing theme ideas

Can you think of and share a moment in your life that you felt your faith was not good enough or strong enough to deal with the present situation – this may have led to feelings of guilt or inadequacy or possibly even envy at others whose faith you perceived to be more or better than your own.

Opening Prayer

Almighty God, your will and purpose are always clear; there are no grey areas. Our faith and trust in you are often uncertain and wavering. Help us to live with our uncertainties, only with the knowledge that in the midst of all these, we have sure ground for courage to face whatever challenges we encounter, only for this reason, that we have our God whose love is unchanging, and whose grace is abundant. May our hope rise in our times of uncertainty, our faith deepen in the face despair. May our lives be anchored in you, and in you alone. Amen

Scripture Reading (Somebody to volunteer to read for the group if connection allows)

Mark 9:14 – 29

Unpacking the Scripture Passage

(Jesus casts out a difficult demon from a boy.)

We may divide this passage into three parts, namely verses 14 – 18, 19 – 27, and 28 - 29.

Verses 14 – 18: The Disciples Are Unable to Cast Out A Demon.

Some of the scribes (teachers of the law) were arguing with them (v.14):

We can assume, from the context that the scribes criticized the disciples for their inability to exorcise the demon from the boy. We may, with some level of cynicism wonder why these same scribes, instead of further embarrassing the disciples before the crowd, did not then exorcise the demon themselves. It is so easy to criticize others when we ourselves cannot and will not lift a finger to assist. It is clear that the disciples did indeed try to exorcise the demon – but they failed. How easy it is to see other people's failure when we did not even begin to make an effort ourselves.

Is this the kind of conflict from which Peter was trying to escape when he suggested that they remain on the mountain top (Mark 9:5)? But for Jesus, basking in the glory and splendor of the transfiguration was not what God had sent him to do in the world. He (and the disciples) simply had to come down from the mountain to confront demons that have sent the world into contortions of pain and destruction. They had to come down the mountain to deal with conflicts and hatred among God's people.

A deaf and mute spirit (v.25b): In contemporary Jewish belief, this was a difficult, if not impossible demon to cast out. The belief then was that one had to know a demon's name before one could cast it out. So if the demon was mute, then no one could ever know its name. (Read Mark 5:1 – 10 where Jesus interacts with the demon(s), during which he asks the demon(s) its/their name). Could this be the reason why the disciples could not cast it out, because they did not know its name?

Jesus addresses the demon directly – he does not need to know its name to have power over it. Jesus is not bound by popular belief; his work is not constrained by not knowing the demon’s name. He has power, even on the nameless things that seek to make our lives difficult and unbearable. We note that the disciples could not cast it out, even though Jesus had given them authority over unclean spirits (Mark 6:7).

Verses 19 – 27: Jesus delivers the boy.

“You unbelieving generation.... how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?” (v.19). From the passage it is not clear who Jesus was addressing and calling a “faithless generation”. Was it the scribes who sought only to oppose his mission and spend time in criticism? Was it the disciples who had seemingly failed to exorcise the demon? Was it the desperate father who did not know what to believe (and what not to believe)? Whoever it is that Jesus was addressing, the tone of his words carries no condemnation or judgment, rather it expresses his sadness at people who should, but do not display any kind of faith or hope.

“When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.” (v.20).

Even before he spoke, the demon recognized who Jesus was. That is the power of Jesus’ presence! He does not need to speak! His presence is enough! Mark gives us another account of a demon recognizing Jesus from a distance, and even knew that he was the “Son of the Most High God” (Mark 5:1 – 9). Note how in this instance the demon pleads with Jesus “In God’s name don’t torture me!” A demon, pleading in God’s name? How interesting, to say the least.

“But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.” (v.20). The father, it seems, is not quite sure that Jesus could do anything about his son’s condition. Considering the “if” he expresses, yes it could be his doubt about Jesus’ ability, but it also brings to emphasis his own uncertainty. The “if” underlines the father’s doubts in what Jesus could do. So Jesus told him, “everything is possible for one who believes” When we trust God as true, and all God’s promises as true, all things will be possible.

“I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (v.24). The father in this account was challenged by Jesus’ call to faith. He was not so sure of Jesus ability to heal his son, but still, he comes to Jesus. Faith tied to unbelief, just as so often in our despair we do not let go of hope, in our fears, we do not let go of whatever courage we have left, in our sorrow, we refuse to let sorrow take over and we find in ourselves a place to smile. We hold these contradictions together as soul mates - belief and unbelief.

***Optional Pause** – Spend a moment or two sharing how each of you are holding onto belief and unbelief in some way in your life.

Question 2 – Digging deeper

- Why do you think the disciples were unsuccessful?

Verse 28 – 29

And when He had come into the house, His disciples asked Him privately, *“Why couldn’t we drive it out?”* So He said to them, *“This kind can come out only by prayer and fasting.”*

Why could they not cast it out? Jesus revealed the reason for their weakness - it was due to a lack of prayer and fasting. Note that Jesus does not mean that prayer and fasting make us more worthy to cast out demons. It is that prayer and fasting draw us closer to the heart of God, and they put us more in line with His power, and we become channels through which God works to cast out demons. No human being should claim to have the power to do anything. We must only, in humility, accept the privilege we have of God working through us; as the expression goes, “all the glory goes to God”. In this instance, Jesus already gave the disciples the authority to cast out demons (Mark 3:14-15), but

that authority was effective only if exercised by faith, and faith is cultivated through spiritual disciplines of prayer and devotion – connection and communion with God.

Exploring the Theme: Faith

How often is it that we are so immersed in our difficulties that we fail to see the possibilities that lie ahead of us? These difficulties cloud our vision of the future, they block our hope for a better future, they crowd our thoughts of what is possible. We believe, yet we do not believe. What causes us to find ourselves in this state of belief and unbelief? How do we find ourselves holding the status of belief, at the same time holding the status of unbelief, two opposing ideas/views? We must not imagine the father crossing from a state of belief to a state of unbelief, as if they are two separate positions. Rather let us understand what he says as the swing of a pendulum - at one moment we are lifted to the one extreme; the heights of faith, especially when we know for certain that we have God's favour, when we know for certain that God loves us, when we are able to say a loud 'Amen' to the words of Jesus that "Everything is possible for one who believes" (Mark 9:23). Yet there comes a time when we are thrown to the other end, the dark, painful, sad side of unbelief. This is when we even question the presence of God.

Short Story

You may have witnessed the following situation or have been in it yourself. A mother in the supermarket, with her two or three year old in tow. She is engrossed in her task of shopping, looking for whatever she needs, moving from aisle to aisle. She turns into an aisle packed with everything a child would want, but that is not what she wants to buy, so she moves on, turns the corner to the next aisle. Meanwhile the little child has stopped in this little part of heaven – sweets, chocolates, marshmallows, chips. Heaven indeed for a child! The child turns around, wanting to ask mummy to get her some sweets, but horror of horrors, mummy is nowhere to be seen. Suddenly, the aisle seems longer and higher; the other shoppers around her become quite strange, they are bigger, taller, and the child is afraid of them (mummy taught her not to trust strangers). Suddenly she finds herself all alone. First is the look of fear, fear painted all over her face, she now struggles to breathe, as if fear has disabled her natural action for living - breathing in and out. Then she finds her voice, and lets out a heart-rending cry 'Mummy'! Who would not feel their heart being torn to bits hearing such a cry? Who would not want to rush to her help on hearing such a cry?

The child cries out for her mother whom she cannot see at that moment. Why? In the couple of years or so, the child has experienced the helping, comforting presence of her mother. She has cried out for help before, and mummy was present with a comforting warm bottle filled with milk formula, mummy was present when she went off balance and fell flat on her bum etc. She knew that she could call out and mummy would come to her aid. In that supermarket, the long aisle, the high shelves, the strange people around her, she knew that mummy is present, somewhere, unseen yet present and that she will answer to her cry. God is present, in the 'help me' moments as well as the 'yippee' moments of our lives.

Question 3 - Reflection

Where are you in your life today? Are you on the 'yippee' side of the pendulum or are you on the 'help me' side?

This is one thing of which you may be assured, God is present at all points of your journey. You may have uncertainties, doubts, fears etc. God understands and is ready to lift you out of your condition

**Optional Hymn - to be read or sung*

**1 Will your anchor hold in the storms of life,
when the clouds unfold their wings of strife?
When the strong tides lift, and the cables strain,
will your anchor drift, or firm remain?**

Refrain:

**We have an anchor that keeps the soul
steadfast and sure while the billows roll;
fastened to the Rock which cannot move,
grounded firm and deep in the Saviour's love!**

**2 Will your anchor hold in the straits of fear,
when the breakers roar and the reef is near?
While the surges rage, and the wild winds blow,
shall the angry waves then your bark o'erflow? [Refrain]**

**3 Will your anchor hold in the floods of death,
when the waters cold chill your latest breath?
On the rising tide you can never fail,
while your anchor holds within the veil. [Refrain]**

**4 Will your eyes behold through the morning light
the city of gold and the harbour bright?
Will you anchor safe by the heavenly shore,
when life's storms are past for evermore? [Refrain]**

Priscilla Owens (1829 – 1907)

The Challenge/Exercise

How can I actively reach out and allow God to minister in my life not only in my yippee moments, but also in my “help me” moments?

***Optional General Remarks – Anybody with last thoughts on the topic**

Closing Time (Host to facilitate or somebody to volunteer)

Praying Together/for One Another/for the World

