



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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O Faithless and Twisted Generation

Luke 9:37-50

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I'm not sure why it never occurred to me before, but as I was preparing for ordination and had just begun preaching, I started to wonder how priests preach on the same lessons—the same Epistles and Gospels specified in the lectionary—year in and year out without saying the same thing over and over. I asked one of the priests who was supervising me and he told me not to worry about it. The average person in the congregation, he said, only remembers twenty per cent of what you'll preach. If they remember a different twenty per cent each year they'll have learned it all in five years, but that's not really a problem, because they never remember a different 20 per cent and by the time you've preached for five years, they'll have forgotten most of it anyway. I'm not quite so cynical, but he did have a point. We rarely learn our lessons the first time around. Even as God speaks to us through the Scriptures, we have a tendency to absorb only what we want, what affirms us in some way, or what fits our preconceived ideas. We forget the rest. Last week I talked about mountaintop experiences. They're not all that different. God reveals himself on the mountain top, he strengthens our faith, but by the time we're down in the valley, many times we've already forgotten what he taught us or we've failed to apply it because it doesn't make sense once we're faced with crisis or with trials. We need to take God's words to heart that he spoke in the midst of the cloud on the Mount of

Transfiguration: "This is my Son...*listen to him.*"

Admittedly, sometimes Jesus is hard to listen to. Sometimes it's not so much the hearing as the understanding. But if we don't listen and if we don't let it sink in, we're not going to grow as disciples. In fact, it's going to undermine our faith, as we'll see this morning. We'll be looking at Luke 9:37-50. Luke ties what we read here directly to the Transfiguration. Remember that Jesus had gone up a mountain to pray and had taken Peter, John, and James with him. Jesus' understanding of his ministry was deepening. He realised that to be the Messiah, the King, meant that he *also* had to be the Suffering Servant. He knew that he couldn't travel around the villages of Galilee forever; he had to go to Jerusalem and he realised that there the Suffering Servant would be rejected and killed by the Jewish elders and priests. Even though he also understood the promise that he would be raised to life again after three days, this was a troubling thing to contemplate. When Jesus told his disciples, they didn't know what to think. They still trusted Jesus. They'd seen enough of God working through him that they didn't just write him off as crazy, but it all *did* sound crazy to them. They didn't understand. So Jesus went up a mountain to pray and he took his friends with him. He prayed; they quickly fell asleep. But as Jesus prayed his glory was revealed. The dazzling brightness startled the disciples out of their sleep and there they saw Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah about his coming "exodus". It was proof for Peter, John, and James that Jesus wasn't crazy. Moses, who represented the Old Testament law, and Elijah, who represented the Old Testament prophets, were passing the torch to Jesus. And God enveloped the disciples in a cloud and spoke just in

case it wasn't clear: "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!"

God made things pretty clear. The disciples were wowed and excited. Peter wanted to build tents so that they could stay with Moses and Elijah. This was the mountaintop experience to top all mountaintop experiences. This was the ultimate faith-building experience. They went back down the mountain with the memory of Jesus' glory having been revealed, of having seen him with Moses and Elijah, and with God himself having revealed to them that Jesus was his Son and his Chosen One and that they needed to listen to him. You'd think that sort of experience would be the foundation for an unshakable faith, right?

It doesn't work that way. As we'll see in today's lesson, which Luke tells us took place the very next day, the disciples didn't take much of their mountaintop experience down into the valley. The day after the Transfiguration, Jesus rebukes them for their lack of faith—and not just once. What's important in this passage is that Jesus ties their lack of faith with a lack of understanding of him and his ministry—they missed the lesson given to them on the mountain. If they're going to be true disciples, they need to know Jesus better and more deeply. They need to better know his nature and the nature of his ministry. Specifically, they need to learn that God's kingdom has very different values than the world. The world values status and honour and power; God's kingdom values sacrifice, servanthood, and humility. Until they grasp this, their faith is going to be weak and ineffective.

Look with me at Luke 9:37-40:

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. And behold, a man from the crowd cried out,

“Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. And behold, a spirit seizes him, and he suddenly cries out. It convulses him so that he foams at the mouth, and shatters him, and will hardly leave him. And I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.”

With this man and his son we’re back to the “poor” and the “outsiders” to whom Jesus has been ministering in Galilee. The fact that the disciples couldn’t heal the boy coupled with the vivid and disturbing description of what the demon was doing to him gives us a sense of the severity of the case. Not only is the boy unclean because of the demon possessing him, but Luke underscores that this boy is the man’s only son. If something happens to him, this man and his wife have no livelihood and no future. It underscores the hopelessness of the human condition as long as we’re subject to sin and death and to the kingdom of the devil.

At least at first, based on the way Luke describes the situation, we might be inclined to excuse the disciples. It sounds like this is a particularly difficult case. But remember what Jesus said when he sent the disciples out. Look back at 9:1:

And he called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over *all* demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.

He gave them power and authority over all demons—*all* demons, not just the weak ones, not just the ones that were easy to cast out, *all* demons—even the really ferocious ones. So what’s the problem? Why

weren’t they able to cast this demon out? Look at verses 41-43:

Jesus answered, “O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.” While he was coming, the demon threw him to the ground and convulsed him. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit and healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And all were astonished at the majesty of God.

“O faithless and twisted generation!” So it’s not that this demon was particularly ferocious or hard to get rid of. The demon *is* ferocious. Luke emphasizes this as the boy is brought to Jesus and the demon throws a tantrum. And yet, once again, Jesus heals the boy with a word. The people were used to lots of prayer and mumbo-jumbo when it came to casting out demons. This is what made Jesus different. He truly had authority. One word and demons were gone. No fights. No long sessions of struggle. The movie *The Exorcist* and the other popular images of struggles with the demonic do *not* reflect the power and authority of Jesus or the same authority he gave to his disciples. No, the problem isn’t the demon. The problem is the disciples, and as Jesus says, their lack of faith. The boy’s father shows more faith than they do. They couldn’t cast out the demon and they gave up, but the boy’s father’s faith was so strong that he actually tracked down Jesus himself and brought his son for healing.

We get a sense of Jesus’ exasperation in his rebuke of the disciples. They’re weak in faith. How long is Jesus going to have to put up with this? Jesus phrases his rebuke in the words of Deuteronomy 32:4-5. It’s from the Song of Moses.

Moses praised the faithfulness of God, but he also recalled the faithlessness of the “crooked and twisted generation” of Israelites who grumbled against him in the exodus. The disciples are about to set out with Jesus on their own exodus, but like the Israelites they lack faith. It’s here one day and gone the next. Think back to the experience in the fishing boat in the storm. They panicked when they should have known better and acted in faith. At the beginning of this chapter Jesus sent them out with power and authority and they came back with great things to report, but then when he asked them to feed the 5000 they told him it couldn’t be done. They cast out demons before, but now they can’t even do that. Spiritually and in terms of faith, they actually seem to be moving backwards.

Consider that Jesus is preparing to go up to Jerusalem. He’s preparing for his “exodus” and he’s chosen these men, these disciples, to carry on his ministry after his exodus. But how are they ever going to do that if they can’t even cast out a simple demon? How are they going to carry the good news of Jesus’ lordship and how are they going to spread his kingdom if they don’t have the faith to exercise the authority he’s given them? We can see why he’s frustrated and rebukes them. But what’s really important here is the *reason* for their lack of faith. How could they lack faith after seeing Jesus transfigured? How could they lack faith after hearing the voice of God telling them who Jesus was and that they should listen to him? What we see next is that none of these things is at the root of their faith problem. The root of their faith problem has to do with a profound lack of understanding of the nature of Jesus, of his kingdom, and of his ministry.

As the crowd gathers in astonishment, Jesus pulls his disciples aside and we can hear the sternness of his words. Remember, what he says to them next is the direct follow-up to his rebuke of their faithlessness:

“Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men.”

“Let these words sink into your ears.” My dad said things similar to that when I needed straightening out—some teachers from time to time too. And to straighten out the disciples—to address their faith problem—Jesus tells them again that he’s going to “delivered into the hands of men.” The Son of Man—that’s Daniel’s prophetic representative of Israel—has to be rejected and killed by his own people. This isn’t new. Jesus has been telling his disciples that this is what’s going to happen. When God spoke on the Mount of Transfiguration it was to assure the disciples that this rejection and death—this “exodus”—were part of his plan and that they needed to listen to Jesus. And now Jesus tells them, in no uncertain terms, that they need to listen to him as he reiterates that he will be rejected and killed. They lack faith. To restore and to grow their faith they need to hear and to understand that Jesus is going to be rejected and killed.

But it doesn’t sink in. In verse 45 Luke tells us:

But they did not understand this saying, and it was concealed from them, so that they might not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying.

Luke tells us in four different phrases or in four different ways

how Jesus’ words didn’t sink in. “They did not understand.” “It was concealed from them.” That doesn’t mean that God deliberately hid it from them; it just means that couldn’t understand the point of it. And as a result they were unable to “perceive it”. And, finally, Luke say, “They were afraid to ask him.” Men, you know how your wife gets angry because you’ve done something wrong. She rebukes you, but you still don’t understand what you did, but you smile and nod anyway and say, “Yes, Dear”? (Women, you know when you rebuke your husband and he smiles and says, “Yes, Dear”?) They knew Jesus was frustrated and angry, they knew they were being rebuked, but the disciples didn’t understand. They were afraid of getting into more trouble so they didn’t ask, they just smiled and nodded, “Yes, Jesus.”

Brothers and sisters, we might smile and nod too. What does Jesus’ being “delivered into the hands of men” have to do with the disciples’ lack of faith? We get another clue in what happens next.

An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest. But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side and said to them, “Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For he who is least among you all is the one who is great.” (Luke 9:46-48)

Jesus has been talking about going to Jerusalem. The disciples “knew” that the Messiah’s mission was to establish his kingdom and rule from Jerusalem. They put two and two together and since they haven’t understood Jesus’ statements about his rejection and death, they’ve got

the idea that when they get to Jerusalem and Jesus takes his throne, they’ll be seated on thrones with him. And so they start arguing about who’s the greatest—who gets to sit closest Jesus and who gets to sit in the spot of special authority at his right hand.

Jesus knows what’s in their hearts. He knows the problem—and it’s the root problem of their lack of faith—so he rebukes them again. This time he draws a child to his side—right to the place of special privilege over which the disciples were arguing—and he tells them that to receive a little child is to receive him—Jesus himself—and to receive Jesus is to receive the Father.

To understand what Jesus is doing here we have to know that in that society children ranked about as low as anyone could get in the social hierarchy. When Jesus talks about “receiving”, what he’s talking about is “welcome” and “hospitality”. It ties into what we’ve talked about before: their whole society was built on a system of patronage and honour. Everything people did was intended to either pay a debt or to put someone else in their debt. And so you only welcomed or showed hospitality to someone who was your better or at least your equal. And now Jesus takes this little child to his side and to a place of special honour. The child was a nobody. And in doing so Jesus rebukes the disciples’ argument. Instead of aspiring to a place of honour, Jesus is saying, you need to aspire to yourself show honour, even to the least in society. This is what the kingdom is all about. If you want to be honoured by me, don’t try to butter me up. It doesn’t work that way in my kingdom. Welcome and show honour to the poor and to the outsider—welcome them into the kingdom. That’s how you find

honour with me. In fact, honour the poor and the outcast just as you would honour me, Jesus says. And just to emphasise how utterly upside-down God's kingdom is in relation to the world, Jesus finishes saying, "The one who is *least* among you is the greatest." The one who is the most humble; the one who honours the sick, the unclean, the poor, the outcast; the one who isn't afraid of getting dirty to cast out a demon, to heal the sick, or to raise the dead, the one who loves his enemies and does good to those who persecute him—the one who is willing to give his own life for the sake of others—he's the greatest in my kingdom.

And yet *still* they don't understand. John, one of the three who was on the mountain when Jesus was transfigured responds. It sounds as though he was one of the disciples arguing over who was the greatest. He knows that Jesus has just rebuked them for their argument, but he doesn't really understand why. He senses that Jesus is upset—maybe that Jesus is saying that he, John, doesn't belong at his right hand. And so John blurts out in verse 49:

“Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us.”

John should have just smiled and nodded. Instead he tries to ingratiate himself to Jesus. “Don't be upset, Jesus. See what we've done for you! When we were out doing the work you gave us to do we saw some guy casting out demons in your name. He wasn't one of us so we told him to knock it off. See, we're protecting the franchise, Jesus.” And Jesus responds:

“Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you.”
(Luke 9:50)

John doesn't get it—at all. Jesus has just told his disciples that to be great in his kingdom means being humble—welcoming the lowest of the low, welcoming the poor and outsiders. And now we see that they're nowhere close to that. They can't even welcome a fellow disciple, because they're concerned with protecting their status with Jesus. They don't want anyone moving in on those twelve royal thrones they think are waiting for them in Jerusalem.

Brothers and sisters, this is what's at the root of the disciples' faith problem: it's their inability to understand the difference between God's kingdom and the world. The world values honour and power; it values wealth and comfort. But God's kingdom values humility. God calls his saints to be servants of others and to be willing to sacrifice even their own lives for the sake of others. This is why Jesus rebuked the disciples by telling them that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of men. Yes, the Messiah is the great King, but he will *only* take his throne as he embraces the sacrificial office of the Suffering Servant. He will only become King as he gives his own life as a sacrifice for the sins of his people. Brothers and sisters, in Jesus God himself became incarnate—became one of us. As if that's not humility enough, he became one of us so that he could give his life for ours and in so doing lead us on an exodus from our bondage to sin and death. This is the ultimate and defining reality of God's kingdom. Our most basic statement of faith is that Jesus is Lord. But we'll never have real and meaningful faith, we'll never do the work of the kingdom with power and authority, until we *also* realise and come to understand that Jesus' lordship isn't like the lordship we

know in the world. It's not like the lordship of Caesar. It's not a lordship that grasps at power and authority; it's not a lordship that seeks its own honour and glory; it's not a lordship that forces others into submission, seeks to use them or that takes advantage of them. Jesus' lordship is a lordship that is humble, that seeks to serve others, that embraces the poor and the outcast and low, and that ultimately sacrifices itself for their sake. Dear friends, if we would be great in God's kingdom, let these words sink into our ears: The Son of Man was delivered into the hands of men. If we would be great in God's kingdom, let us follow in the footsteps of our master. In love and humility, let us be servants of the least of these and let us be ready to face suffering and rejection for their sake.

Let us pray: Loving Father, while we were yet sinners and rebellious God-haters, you gave your own Son to be a sacrifice for our sins that we might be restored to your fellowship. Increase our faith as we learn to follow in his humble servant footsteps. Give us the grace not only to hear him as he speaks, but that what he tells us might sink into our ears and that we might understand it. We ask this in his name. Amen.