

Proper 19B (Pentecost 15)

Text: Mark 9:14-29

Title: "A Father's Faith"

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Families define us. They make us who we are.

You are someone's son or daughter, many of you are husbands or wives, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles. Families give you someone to love and care for, and someone to love and care for you.

From the beginning God created us to be in families- husband and wife together bringing children into the world. God Himself was born a child with a mom and dad, brothers and sisters.

Families are important to us. Our mission statement is "Reaching out to build Christ-centered families of faith." What do these families look like? What does it mean to have Christ in the center of your family?

Last week we saw a Christ-centered family of faith. A mother had a demon-possessed daughter. Having a family of faith does not mean having the picture-perfect family, a family where everyone is healthy and no one ever fights and everyone is perfectly behaved. Because of our sinfulness, we'll never have that perfect family. But it's not about us and what great people we are. A family of faith has Christ at its center, and not itself.

This mother of faith had Christ at the center of her family. She begged Jesus on behalf of her daughter. She wouldn't let Him go until He had granted her request.

Having a Christ-centered family of faith is not about having a perfect family, but in trusting in God for all things.

Today we meet a father of faith. Much like the mother from last week, this father's son had a demon. The demon gave him dangerous seizures that even threatened his life.

First, the man had gone to the disciples to cast out the demon. But they couldn't help. Nothing they tried did any good. Many of you have sought help for your family members in need. You've gone from doctor to doctor looking for help, but nothing seems to work. No one is able to help.

Finally, the son is brought to Jesus. His father sounds pretty hopeless. He sounds defeated. "If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us," he says. The father has been disappointed before. All the previous attempts to help his son have failed. Why should this time be any different? Why should this teacher prevail where so many else have failed? What makes Jesus any different than the rest?

The father's words show that he still has some doubts. He's not quite sure that Jesus can do the job. He's been disappointed before, and he doesn't want to get his hopes up, only to have them dashed once again.

Jesus picks up on this right away. "If you can?" Jesus asks. "All things are possible for one who believes."

The words cut right to the father's heart. He wants desperately to believe but he still struggles with his doubts. He's still not quite sure. He's not sure if Jesus will be able to help him. Immediately the father prays, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief."

Those are some amazing words. Not quite what you would expect from a father of faith. In these words, however, we see what faith really is.

Faith is trusts in Jesus for all things, even for faith itself. Faith prays for faith and looks to Jesus to give faith. Faith is a gift of God. It's not something we can work up in ourselves.

As Lutherans, we know that we are saved by faith and not by works. Most of you probably know Ephesians 2:8-9 by heart. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith."

If I were to ask you how you are saved, you would probably reply something like this, "There's nothing you can do to earn salvation, all you have to do is believe." Have you ever heard someone say that, "all you have to do is believe"?

This makes it sound as though faith is something that you do, something that you're responsible for. Jesus died on the cross, but it's up to you to believe in Him. Jesus did His part, and now you've got to do something, you've got to believe to make it count.

When we turn faith into a work that we do, there's problems. If you struggle with your faith and have doubts, you begin to wonder if you are really saved. Have you ever had questions or doubts, wonder if you truly believe, if you have that gift of faith?

The fact is, we all have doubts and questions from time to time. If you're truly honest, you can think of times when you struggled with your faith.

The good news is that it's not all up to us. Faith is not something that you do. If it were up to us to believe, if our salvation depended on how strongly we trusted in Jesus, we would all be in trouble. We would fail miserably. We all have questions and doubts. We all fail to trust in God at all times. We find ourselves questioning God's ability, just like this father did.

And so we pray along with this father of faith, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." When you are struggling with your faith, pray that the Lord would strengthen your faith, to help you with your unbelief.

Faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit. As Luther explains in the third article of the creed, "I believe that I cannot by my own power or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him, but

the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the one true faith...”

You cannot come to faith on your own. You don't come to faith by examining all the evidence and coming to a logical conclusion. Faith isn't created by careful arguing.

And you don't come to faith by closing your eyes and trying really hard to believe all the unbelievable things about who Jesus is and what he's done.

Faith is created by the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit works through the gospel, through the Word of God. Spirit and word go together.

You believe, not because you try real hard to believe, or because you've been convinced by a series of logical arguments. You have faith because you've heard the good news, and the Holy Spirit has called you to faith through this word. “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing from the word of God.”

When you struggle with your faith, the answer is not to do anything, but to listen. Listen to God's word. Come to church. Here His word read and preaching. Taste His word in bread and wine. Open your Bible and read God's word into your own ears. Let Him speak to you and strengthen your faith.

This church is not just for people who have it all figured out, who are super-Christians who never have doubts or questions. This church is for those who have questions, for those who still aren't quite sure, who need to be reassured that God loves and forgives them.

The church is for people like this father, who needs help not just for his family, but with his own faith.

This father is not the typical example of faith. Real men are supposed to be strong. And when it comes to faith, men are supposed to be pillars of strength. We sing songs about the Faith of our Fathers. We have this picture of a father who never shows any weakness.

To have a strong faith means trusting in Jesus for everything, even for your faith. Families of faith are not centered on fathers or mothers, but on Christ. Fathers of faith trust in Jesus for all things, even for faith itself.

When you find yourself sitting a hospital room with someone in your family, and you feel uneasy, and unsure about the future, pray. Pray for faith to trust in Jesus. Pray that He'll help you through.

When someone you know is in trouble, when someone is having a difficult time, don't tell them to have faith, or just trust in Jesus. That's just giving them something more to do. Simply tell them about Jesus, who He is what He's done. That will create faith.

Faith can never talk about itself. As soon as you start talking about your faith, you're talking about yourself. Faith only wants to talk about Jesus. Faith talks about everything that Jesus has done and continues to do for you.

Families of faith don't talk about themselves, they only talk about Jesus. When we say "Christ-centered families of faith" it's redundant. We're saying the same thing twice. Faith means being centered on Christ.

Last week it was a mother of faith, begging for her daughter. This week it is a father of faith, who prays not only for his son, but for his own faith. Next week it's on to the kids. What does it mean to be a child of faith?