

“Amazed at Their Unbelief”

[2 Corinthians 12:7a-10](#); [Mark 6:1-6b](#)

July 7, 2024 – Seventh Sunday After Pentecost – St. Paul UCC, New Bremen

Sermon Preached by Rev. David Voll, Interim Pastor

For the past couple of weeks, my messages have centered on faith – having faith during the storms of life and maintaining faith when we feel like God puts us on hold and doesn’t seem to answer our prayers in a timely fashion or at all. Today I’m continuing the theme, but from a different perspective.

But first, a favorite faith story. A hiker on some high cliffs suddenly felt the ground give way underneath him and he began to fall...but thankfully as he went over the edge he caught hold of a tree branch growing out of the face of the cliff. He was too far from the top to climb back up, and below him was a sheer drop of several hundred feet. So the hiker couldn’t climb up and had no way of getting down.

In desperation he began to shout, “Is there anyone up there?” No answer... but he continued to shout: “Is there anyone up there?” Then there came a voice that said, “Im up here. This is God. Everything will be all right. Let go and you’ll fall safely to the ground. Just have faith...and let yourself go.”

The hiker was silent, not believing what he just heard. Let go? He thought to himself for a moment & called out again, “Is there anyone else up there?”

Granted this is an extreme illustration, but imagine how amazed – and dare I say frustrated – God must get at our unbelief, at our lack of faith.

I heard something about the discovery of America, which relates a bit to observing the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. Consider what a step of faith it was for Christopher Columbus to discover the New World in 1492. The average speed of his three ships across the Atlantic was only 2 miles an hour. Can you imagine.... 2 miles an hour? I get antsy when I’m on a two-lane state highway behind someone who’s only doing 45. It’s no wonder that his crew felt like mutiny at times. Imagine how frustrated Columbus might have felt at his crew’s lack of faith. And yet he persevered; he was committed to his dream.

Jesus knew what it was to be amazed and frustrated by peoples’ unbelief. As we read, he’s in his home town of Nazareth with his disciples, teaching in the temple on the Sabbath. His friends and neighbors are astonished. “Who is this that’s teaching? Jesus, the carpenter?” “It is – it’s Mary’s boy...” And they say that his brothers and his sisters “live right here with us.” They know him and his whole family. And yet the people are offended by him! In response Jesus says, in effect: “A prophet is honored everywhere except in his home town, among his relatives, and by his own family.”

Has this ever happened to you? Are you still identified by childhood stories and experiences you can’t shake? For nearly 40 years when I would go back and visit my home church where I grew up, I was still little David!

As we read: “He could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.” Why do you think that was? Why couldn’t he do any other miracles? Why? Because of their unbelief! Even Jesus couldn’t do any mighty work unless the people believed!

Mark writes that Jesus was amazed that they wouldn’t believe in him. I wonder if this got him thinking: “OK, this is going to be harder than I thought.” He can’t believe....their

unbelief! He marvels at those who stop and stare but leave uninspired or untouched by what they've seen.

It's been said that there are two levels of belief or unbelief. One is with the head, the other is with the heart. It makes sense. Few people disbelieve with their heads.

Studies show that most of our population acknowledges intellectually that there's a God, but over 60% of Americans don't worship regularly. Believing in your head is one thing; acting on it and taking it to heart is another. The Bible says, "Even the demons believe and shudder."

Faith in Christ is more than just intellectual acknowledgment. It's believing with the heart, with the will; it's believing with adoration, with action. Faith is to believe what we don't see, until the day we get to see what we've believed – like radar that, in the fog, sees at a distance what our eyes can't.

Years ago a group of visitors were taken through a national mint where coins are made. They were told in the smelting works that if you first dipped your hand in water, a ladle of molten metal could be poured over your hand without burning it. A husband and wife were part of the tour group. The guide said to the husband, "Perhaps you'd like to try it?" but he pulled away quickly and said, "No thanks! I'll take your word for it." So the guide turned to the wife, "Would you like to try?" "Sure!" she said, and pulled her sleeve up & put her arm in a bucket of water. Upon removing it she calmly held out her hand while the scorching liquid metal was poured over it. She was fine!

As Jesus might have done after telling a parable, we might ask: which of the two really believed the guide? The husband believed at one level – but wasn't willing to test his belief. Conversely, the wife was willing to step out and believe with her whole being – the kind of risk that faith in Christ demands.

Many believed when they saw the miracles of Jesus firsthand, but few let it make a difference in their lives. That's still true today. Many of us believe with our intellect and even with some of our heart, but our belief still doesn't impact all areas of our lives. And many of us believe enough to keep us relatively decent, but maybe not enough to really make a difference.

Do you believe enough so that your faith will make a difference in your life? Do you believe enough so that you'll change some things? Do you believe enough to leave your comfort zones and be of service? Do you believe enough so that you'll respond to and talk more lovingly to others? Do you believe enough so that you'll give up being overly critical, or talking behind people's backs? Do you believe enough so your faith impacts your choices? Do you believe enough so that you'll be more active in the life of this congregation and in your attendance and in your giving? Do you believe enough to honestly and sincerely bear the name Christian, and be glad to do it?

These are ultimately faith issues. If someone asked you about your faith, or even asked, "Who is Christ for you?" How would you answer? I fear that if someone asked, some of us would merely say that Jesus is God's Son and that he died a martyr's death, but I wonder if we're even certain that he's the Savior of the world. He really has the power to redeem you! Each. One. Of. You! And everyone else! Yet some of us still say, "I don't know if I'm good enough; or I don't deserve it." He must be amazed at, and so frustrated by, our unbelief!

As we read in 2 Corinthians, Paul wrote, "(The Lord said) My grace is sufficient for you..." That's all you need. What a hard thing for us to accept. Too often we're like the

old man riding on a donkey while he carried a 200-pound sack of wheat on his shoulders. Someone asked him why he didn't take the weight off his own shoulders and strap it directly on the donkey. "Oh, no!" he protested. "I couldn't ask the donkey to carry all that weight!"

Many of us are carrying burdens today that we don't need to carry. Many of us have experienced failure and felt rejected. But as we heard in our Gospel text, at least we're comforted in knowing that Jesus understands what that feels like! But many still wallow in it. We know that it's our lack of faith, our lack of belief that God wants to bless us, that God is grace-filled, and that God really is able to relieve our burdens so we don't have to carry such a heavy load. Christ must be amazed at and frustrated by our unbelief!

Faith is more than just believing with your head. It's a dynamic interaction with God's will and purpose. It's the conviction of knowing the "blessed assurance" that because of Christ, we can live joyfully and abundantly! It's living with a positive expectation, regardless of the circumstances.

A driver once made his way nervously along one of the most treacherous roads in the Rocky Mountains. As he approached an extremely narrow pass, he asked himself whether or not he'd make it. There was no guardrail, nothing to keep him from plunging thousands of feet down the side of the mountain. Then he spotted a small sign, seemingly in response to his question. It read, "O yes you can. Millions have!"

Jesus is speaking similar words to many of us who have doubts and fears about the present and the future. "O yes you can. I'm with you; that's all you need."

The apostle Paul said a similar thing. He was able to accept his thorn in the flesh because he knew and believed that God's grace was all he needed.

I'm sure Jesus gets frustrated by and amazed at our unbelief. If this is you, you're not alone. Many of us are in the same boat. If we could just believe with joy the message of the Gospel, we could live every day with hope and face every difficulty and every moment of the future with the blessed assurance that says, "O yes you can. Millions have!" Amen.