

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: October 30, 2016
Sermon Title: Some Things Need More Than a Miracle
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Mark 9:14-29

Mark 9:14-29

When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. He asked them, 'What are you arguing about with them?' Someone from the crowd answered him, 'Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.' He answered them, 'You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.' And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it threw the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, 'How long has this been happening to him?' And he said, 'From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.' Jesus said to him, 'If you are able! All things can be done for the one who believes.' Immediately the father of the child cried out, 'I believe; help my unbelief!' When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, 'You spirit that keep this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!' After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, 'He is dead.' But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, 'Why could we not cast it out?' He said to them, 'This kind can come out only through prayer.'

That is quite a Bible story isn't it? A father brings his son to Jesus, looking for help. The boy is troubled in some way, broken. The Bible describes it as

“demon possession.” Some aspect of evil has taken him over, he’s not himself, he is beside himself—all the phrases we use when someone we love isn’t the way we’d like them to be. Given the symptoms, modern scholars would say he had seizures, epilepsy. All the dad knew was that his son was hurting.

There is so much in this story, Alida even preached on it last week. Here are the highlights: the father had brought the boy to the disciples, and despite all the successes in other areas of their ministry, they couldn’t do anything. They couldn’t help this young man. The father then brings the boy to Jesus and says, “If you can, help us,” *if you can*. Jesus even repeats the father’s words, “If you can,” reminding him, “All things are possible if you believe.” *ALL things are possible if, IF you believe*. The boy’s father jumps on this, with a most wonderful, honest, heartfelt human response: “I believe,” he almost shouts, “I believe,” and then probably softening his voice, “help thou mine unbelief.”

Most of us have been there, haven’t we? We are looking for a job, weeks go on, months go on, we are trying to stay positive. We are sick, we get a cancer diagnosis, we go through some surgery, treatment, we want to be hopeful. A relationship ends, a marriage, a friendship. Something you believed in. Your heart breaks. We want to love again. We suffer a loss, a defeat, a disappointment. We want to try, try again, but in all those situations, a little self-doubt creeps in. A little fear takes hold. We worry, we wonder if we are kidding ourselves. We wonder if it’s worth it. We believe, but we still have some unbelief. We believe, we really do, maybe a little, maybe a lot. We are trying our best to stay hopeful, stay positive. We are trying hard to believe that God really is on our side, helping us along, pulling us through.

I think Jesus was impressed by that dad. By the dad’s persistence and by the dad’s humble admission of imperfect faith. So Jesus heals the boy, whatever his torment, whatever his brokenness, whatever his hurt, Jesus healed him. Afterward, the disciples wanted to know why they couldn’t heal the boy. They had tried their best. They had been watching Jesus for three years as he dealt with people and all sorts of problems. Sometimes he touched people, sometimes people touched him. One time he even put his own spit on a blind man’s eyes. Sometimes he spoke to the demons. Sometimes he just said the word and people were healed.

I’m guessing the disciples did their best to imitate Jesus, they tried to hold their hands just the way Jesus did. They spoke the same words, used the same tone of voice. They did their best. And it wasn’t enough. Jesus explained, “Sometimes the only thing that works is prayer and fasting.”

Doctors have an M.O., a protocol, the way they go about things, the way they address the patient's problem. The doctor asks your history, notes your symptoms, take some tests, makes a diagnosis, offers a remedy. Jesus probably had his own M.O. He had his own protocol, a way of going about things to try to help people. But some things, Jesus said, defy the usual, resist the routine. Some things require "thinking outside the box," a fresh approach. The routine won't do it.

"Prayer and fasting" in church language are called "disciplines." *Discipline*. When you're out of whack, you need discipline. We often think of discipline as punishment, and that's one definition. Prison is a discipline. Detention in school, being made to run extra laps, being grounded, being fined—those are all disciplines as punishment. That's not what Jesus was talking about. To be spiritually disciplined, to submit to "prayer and fasting" is to give up your old way in order to try a new way.

Today, we have our Pivot House friends with us. They have already filled our church with music; their energy, their power, their talent, all of that has lifted our spirits, put a smile on our faces, and given us joy. And we're used to that. These Pivot House men are old friends. They've been singing here for years on a Sunday morning. They are the spiritual conclusion to the Dogwood Festival, standing outside the sanctuary, their voices wafting across the Green, inspiring our Dogwood Mother's Day crowds. We are used to that. They sing great.

But that's not why they're here. They're here because each man up here singing, each one has been like the son in the Bible story today. Each man in Pivot House knows what it's like to be broken, tormented, out of control. From drugs, from alcohol, from both. Some have lived on the streets, some have been in prison; they all defied the best efforts. Their parents, just like the dad in the story, their spouses, their friends. Even some of Jesus's disciples, their pastors, their Bible teachers—they all tried, they all failed. Until one day . . . one day. They were ready for "prayer and fasting." They were ready for something new. They were ready to sacrifice, to give it all up, to be cleansed.

I've been a pastor almost 50 years, my life filled with good folks whose lives have been filled with brokenness, torment, hurt, addictions, and demons and travails of every kind attacking body, mind, and spirit. All those people, hundreds, thousands of people, can be put in two groups. Group 1: Don't bother me. I can handle it. I don't need any help. I can do it myself. Group 2: "Lord, if you can, help me." "I believe, help thou my unbelief." "I am willing to pray and to fast." "I'll do whatever it takes."

I was a baseball coach for many years. One year I had this big, tall, strapping boy, strong as an ox. He stood in the batter's box like a superstar, had a big, beautiful swing. Never hit a thing. Never. Struck out all the time, but he looked good doing it. One game, after I had screamed and yelled at him in the dugout and pulled his hat off his head and got into his face, I convinced him to choke up on the bat, bend his knees, crouch a little. So he did it, and he hit a double. Next time up, he was back to his old ways, he didn't like how he looked all choked up on the bat, in his crouch, he said, he'd rather be "Mighty Casey" striking out than look like a wimp hitting a double.

These men here today, our Pivot House friends, they got tired of striking out. They were ready for discipline; *discipline*, not punishment. They were ready to make every sacrifice. They were ready to look weak in order to become strong.