

Apostles Anglican Church

The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost

Fr. Rob Goebel

Main Text: Mark 9:14–29

Title: Faith Without a Doubt is Dead

Collect of the Day

O God, because without you we are not able to please you, mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, you gave your Apostles grace truly to believe and to preach your word: Grant that we might love what they believed and preach what they taught through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

It was a beautiful spring day with just a few clouds in the sky. Josh was excited for the day ahead and asked his friends to go on a long walk with him. His friends Andy and Matt weren't sure about this. You see, Josh had led them on some pretty crazy adventures before, and they had some run-ins with the law. But after talking it over, they decided to go with the group and see what the day would hold for them. Josh said he knew where he was going, and off he went. Again, Andy and Matt looked at each other, wondering what Josh was up to, but they followed along with everyone else. Little did they know their decision to go with Josh and the others would end in their complete humiliation.

Josh was a popular guy, at least among some, and he knew lots of people. Along the way, they saw some other friends, and Josh invited them to come walk with them. Andy and Matt started to get concerned as the group got bigger and bigger. This was usually when the trouble would start. Finally, they came to a trailhead leading up to this massive mountain. This is what Josh had planned

all along. Andy and Matt thought it looked pretty good; they loved mountain climbing and they actually got excited.

At this point, there were over a hundred people with them. Just before jumping on the trail to head up the mountain, Josh turned to everyone and said, “Hey, thanks for coming for a walk with me. Now, my best friends and I are going to go on a hike together. The rest of you stay here.

Andy and Matt thought that was kinda strange, but it sounded fun, so off they went. Josh saw them following him and said, “No, not you guys. You stay here; I’m just taking Jay, Pete, and John with me. I have something really spectacular planned for them. You don’t get to come.” Andy and Matt were devastated. They had come all this way. They had been friends with Josh for a long time, and now he left them behind with the crowd.

You may have realized by now that Josh is Jesus, and Andy and Matt are his disciples, Andrew and Matthew. I may have taken a little license with some details from today’s Gospel passage. But the names were changed to protect the innocent.

Can’t you imagine this might be how the disciples who were left behind felt?

Jesus left them behind and took Peter, James, and John to the mountaintop.

To add insult to injury, while Jesus is on the mountain, a man comes looking for him, seeking deliverance for his son. When he finds Jesus isn’t there, he asks the disciples for help, but the disciples can’t drive out the demon. All eyes are on them—eyes of disdain. Humiliated, every stare probably felt like an accusation. “You’re not one of Jesus favorite disciples.” “You can’t heal the sick!”

So here they are, feeling devastated, humiliated, and abandoned, and they can’t do what they’ve seen Jesus do countless times. Of course, they lack faith; of course, they’re filled with doubt.

I would be, wouldn’t you be too?

In fact, our position isn't too much different from theirs.

Christ has gone away to glory with the Father. He's left us behind in a needy and desperate world filled with unimaginable horrors, and he expects us to continue the work he started.

So, yeah, I have doubts.

Yeah, my faith is tested from time to time. I'm sure most, if not all, of you can relate.

Our Gospel passage is chalked full of doubt.

When Jesus is told his disciples couldn't help the boy controlled by a demon, he calls them a "faithless generation." It must have been so crushing to be called this by Jesus.

But the disciples doubt.

When the boy's father comes to Jesus, he says, "if you can // **if you can** do anything, have compassion on us and help us."

If you can!

The father doubts.

If we expect never to doubt, if we hide our doubts from others, we're setting ourselves up for disaster. Because it's not a matter of "if" doubts will come, it's a matter of "when" they will come or "when will they return." And if we're not expecting them, they can create a crisis of faith from which a total loss of faith is a real possibility.

So, let's take just a few minutes to consider doubt and the role it plays in our faith.

Yes! Doubt plays a role in our faith, no doubt.

Orthodox Priest and writer Fr. Jeremy _____ wrote:

Some forms of doubt truly are healthy. For example, a person who has grown up in a Christian home, when entering into his teenage or early adult years, will have to make the faith his own. He will hear things in the world that will cause him to question parts or even the entirety of his upbringing. These are trials of fire that burn away elements that have no real foundation in order to expose the true inner state. He will realize that in order to be a Christian, he must do more than take his faith for granted. It must be consciously cultivated to be made real.¹

“Is there a God,” is a great question!

It has been the starting point of faith for many Christians. For example, a famous author who once wrote to a friend, “I believe in no religion. There is absolutely no proof for any of them, and from a philosophical standpoint, Christianity is not even the best.” These words were pinned by the author of many Christian classics, including *The Weight of Glory*, *The Great Divorce*, and the *Chronicles of Narnia*, to name just a few. That’s right, C.S. Lewis had been an atheist before he set out to disprove God’s existence.

Later in life, when his wife died, Lewis struggled with his faith. You can read more about his struggle in his book *A Grief Observed*. But this time of struggle didn't weaken Lewis’ faith; in the end, it strengthened.

Doubts often arise in times of crisis.

When we see senseless acts of violence playing out in places where some of the most vulnerable among us learn and play, we ask, “Why, oh God, is there such pain and evil in the world?”

When we or a loved one are faced with a devastating diagnosis, we often cry out to God, “Why, God, is this happening to me?” Why do you allow sickness and death?”

These are good and valid questions.

¹ <https://www.orthodoxroad.com/faith-and-doubt/>

Answering them can take a lifetime, but when we return to God time and time again, seeking an answer for the devastating events of our lives, we find answers little by little. In this process, we come to know God the Father in a deeper way each time.

This is not unlike the relationship between friends who have gone through hardship together time and time again. The bond created between them is extremely strong and unlike any other human relationship.

Don't hear what I'm not saying. God does not willingly afflict us, but He's unwilling to let the pains and tragedies of our lives have the final word. In these times, we can often feel that God is nowhere to be found. Nothing could be further from the truth.

He's not high above on His heavenly throne, looking down on us like a sadistic kid burning ants with a magnifying glass and laughing at our pain. He's not indifferent to our pains and tragedies either.

God is not on the sidelines. He's in the game!

You might ask, "Why, then, does God not intervene?"

The better question is, "Why, then, does God not intervene in the way I think He should intervene?"

My friends, we are not God, and thank God we're not. Can you imagine the mess we'd make of our lives and the world if we had all the power of God?

We don't see things from all perspectives at the same time, so we can't know the ripple effect our choices would have if we could control things.

This is something I have considered for over 30 years. Some of you may know that when I was 15, my mother was killed in a car accident. Since then, I have often contemplated what it would be like if I could go back in time and stop that tragic accident from happening.

I would do this out of love for my mother, but what effects might it have?

I don't know because I don't have a time machine. But, consider this,

- Before my mom was killed, my dad and I had a poor, almost adversarial relationship. Our relationship improved after having lived through the aftermath and difficulties of that time. Today, we enjoy a warm, loving relationship. Would our relationship be the same today if I were able to prevent my Mom from being killed? I don't know for sure, but I doubt it.
- As a direct result of my mother's death, three of my family members came to know Christ. One of them was on their way to a life of crime and addiction. // Now, I know God has any number of ways to draw us to himself, and these family members may have come to Christ without my mother's death, but given the choice, I wouldn't take the chance, and I know my mom would have willingly laid down her life for them.
- God didn't cause the accident that took my mom's life, but God used that tragedy and redeemed it in ways I will never comprehend until I come to glory.

Am I happy my mom was killed? No! But I'm also glad I don't have a time machine.

I'm glad I'm not God, and I'm so thankful that God walked beside me every step of the way, that he cried with me, that he held me when I couldn't hold myself up.

Because he loves us, God doesn't always intervene in our lives as we think he should.

That can cause doubt. And that's understandable. But we can't let our doubts destroy our faith.

If we let it, the doubt that teaches can become a doubt that destroys.

Doubt that destroys is already convinced. Its approach is disingenuous. It has a closed mindset, and it's already surrendered to its misery.

We can keep doubt from going from a doubt that teaches to a doubt that is destructive by being prepared for it when it eventually comes.

We set ourselves up for disaster when we believe the lie that doubts only represent a lack or loss of faith. Questioning and doubting often accompany those who walk by faith and not by sight because faith is the “substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things **not seen.**”

We can also prepare for times of doubt by sharing our doubts with other Christians—those who can support us in times of doubt and those who we can inspire to persevere in doubt by sharing our stories of a strengthened faith that came to us through our doubts.

If we are to weather the storms of doubt and reach the shores of renewed faith, we must keep an open heart—a heart ready to listen and receive answers. We must be open to hearing and facing difficult realities.

And even as we doubt, we must cry out, “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.”

Amen.

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