



Central Peninsula Church

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Luke 9:37-50
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A Work in Progress

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

How many of you have had a rough week? Come on, let's be honest now! Do you ever feel like things are going well and you're kind of on a roll and then everything falls apart? You thought you were doing so well and then you have a week where you realize how far you still have to go. I had a week like that. It actually started out pretty good because I got to play golf on Monday with my son and my dad. And then I shot an 86, which for me is awesome! There I am with my dad and my son out on the golf course, three generations of Mitchells, and I shoot an 86. It doesn't get any better than that!

But the rest of the week was something of a disaster. The worst part of it was that it wasn't just circumstances; it was how I responded to those circumstances. Spiritually speaking, I didn't shoot an 86 this week. I didn't even break 100. Do you ever feel like that? Do you ever feel like you're rolling along spiritually – you're believing God for big things; you're getting new insights; you're falling more in love with him; you're having great fellowship with other believers; and then, BAM! you have a week where it all falls apart.

Of course you have. We all know what that's like. As a matter of fact, you're really glad right now to know that I have times like that. It's just good to know that you're not the only one. Well, if that's true you're really going to like this story from the Gospel of Luke, because in this story many of the flaws of the disciples are exposed. One of the great things about the gospels is that it's so darned honest about its heroes. That's really true of the whole Bible. All of its heroes have feet of clay. They're all a work in progress, just like us. But Jesus stuck with them and somehow God still used them to turn the world upside down.

In this story we'll see four different areas in which the disciples reveal that they're a work in progress. They're areas in which you may see yourself struggling as well.

I. The disciples lack faith vv.37-43a

“On the next day, when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met Him. And a man from the crowd shouted, saying, ‘Teacher, I beg You to look at my son, for he is my only boy, and a spirit seizes him, and he suddenly screams, and it throws him into a convulsion with foaming at the mouth; and only with

difficulty does it leave him, mauling him as it leaves. I begged Your disciples to cast it out, and they could not”” (vv. 37–40).

Notice it starts out and says “the next day, when they came down from the mountain.” The day before Jesus had taken Peter, John and James up on a high mountain where they saw the light show of their lives. Jesus was transfigured before them. He had a little visit from a couple of old friends – Moses and Elijah. And then they all heard the voice of God speak from the cloud: “This is my Son! Listen to him!” What an experience! Talk about shooting an 86! They're playing scratch golf! They're on a spiritual high.

But then they come down the mountain, and talk about “back to reality.” In the midst of the crowd a man cries out to Jesus. His only son is demon possessed and it's destroying his life. It throws him into convulsions. He screams and foams at the mouth and it mauls him before it leaves. The way he describes it reveals that this didn't just happen once but it happened over and over again. I'm sure he had tried everything possible to help his son. Can you just imagine for a minute what this would be like? Don't just read this like it's some Bible story that happened so long ago and so far away that you can't identify at all with it. Imagine this being your only son. Imagine the sleepless nights and the constant anxiety of when and where it would happen next. Imagine the strain on the marriage and bank account. Imagine the broken dreams. This dad never played any golf with his son. You know, sooner or later we all confront things that are just too big for us to handle. Things that we just can't fix on our own. What do we do then?

No doubt this father had heard about Jesus and how he had power over the demonic world. So he brings his son to the disciples. Remember that at the beginning of chapter six Jesus sent his disciples out on their first mission. He gave them authority over all the demons (9:1) and they went out and they preached and they healed and they cast out demons just like he had. But here we see that yesterday's success didn't guarantee today's success. Imagine the disciples blushing with shame and kicking the dirt as this father explained their failure. They must have felt like he was sort of “telling on them.”

You have to wonder what had gone wrong. Was there some kind of spiritual short circuit in their prayer life? Had they forgotten to pray altogether? Had they

grown arrogant from their early successes? Maybe the fact that Jesus had started talking about his coming suffering and death caused them to doubt. We don't know exactly, but Jesus seems to put his finger on the problem in v. 41. **"And Jesus answered and said, 'You unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you and put up with you? Bring your son here.'"**

You get this sense that Jesus was really frustrated here. He's frustrated with the whole thing. Have you ever seen some kind of tragic evil take place and just kind of sigh and say, "What kind of world allows this to happen? How long can this go on?" I think that's what Jesus was feeling. And he blames it on an "unbelieving and perverted generation." I think he's most frustrated with his own disciples. It's almost like, "Man, I go away for one night and look what happens. What's the matter with you guys?" And he identifies the problem; it was a lack of faith. They didn't really believe God could and would heal this boy. For some reason this particular case seemed too big for them.

I'm embarrassed to say that this has happened to me more than once. I've confronted situations where I've tried everything and nothing seems to work so I stop trying. And at the bottom of that is a lack of faith. I've had people come to see me for marriage counseling and I've listened and listened and tried to offer some kind of help; I've tried everything that has worked in the past, but the thing is too complicated and too big and I've sat people down and said, "I can't help you."

What we need to know is that nothing is too big for God. Jesus says, "Bring the boy to me."

"While he was still approaching, the demon slammed him to the ground and threw him into a convulsion. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, and healed the boy and gave him back to his father. And they were all amazed at the greatness of God" (vv. 42–43a).

What were they all amazed at? Not just Jesus, but the "greatness of God" as seen through Jesus. You see, that's the key. Do you believe in the greatness of God? Do you believe he is greater than this thing? Some of you are facing things that are too big for you. Like this father, you're in a battle. Maybe it's some sin that keeps dragging you down. Maybe it's a fear and anxiety or depression. Maybe it's your marriage. Maybe it's a person in your life that brings out the worst in you. Whatever it is, God is greater and don't stop believing that he can and will deal with it.

II. The disciples lack understanding vv.43b-45

While all the people are marveling at what

has just taken place, Jesus turns to his disciples and says,

"But while everyone was marveling at all that He was doing, He said to His disciples, 'Let these words sink into your ears; for the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men'" (vv. 43b–44).

It seems like a rather strange thing to say at this point. Perhaps part of what he's saying is, "You won't always have me around to clean up your messes!" But Jesus is absolutely emphatic about this: "Let these words sink into your ears..." The strange thing is that the one who just delivered the boy from a powerful demon will be delivered into the hands of men. The powerful one will soon appear powerless. As Jesus moves towards Jerusalem, he won't allow his disciples to define him apart from suffering. He doesn't want his power to blur their vision of the cross.

But here is where we see another flaw in the disciples. **"But they did not understand this statement, and it was concealed from them so that they would not perceive it; and they were afraid to ask Him about this statement"** (v. 45). The disciples still don't get it. He told them the same thing about a week earlier in 9:22. And then three of them had at least heard him talking about the same thing with Moses and Elijah the night before. And now he says it again and they still don't get it. And the way Luke puts it he makes it clear that something was concealing it from them, but at the same time they're to blame because "they were afraid to ask him about this statement." You know what that's like. You don't want to look stupid so you pretend you know what the guy is talking about, but you really have no idea. I'm kind of that way with the economy. I don't really understand the economy. I know it's important; I know it impacts my life. People start talking about the economy and I feel I really should know what they're talking about. So I don't ask any questions. I just pretend I understand how interest rates and the Fed and GNP works, but I really don't. That's how the disciples were.

But if you don't ask, you don't learn. Some of you feel the same way about the Christian faith or about the Bible that I feel about the economy. You know it's important. You know it impacts your life. But there are certain things you just don't get. Unfortunately everyone else seems to get it, so the last thing you want to do is ask the hard questions because you don't want to look like a spiritual idiot. But if you don't ask, you'll never get it.

You don't want to end up like Larry King. He once said: "I can't make that leap that a lot of people around me have made into belief that there's some judge somewhere. I have a lot of respect for true people of faith...I've done so many interviews on it. I've always searched. But as someone said, "Did you ever sit down and read the Bible cover to cover?" The answer's no, because I don't know who wrote it. I'm too in my head to be into faith. Faith is a wonderful thing. I envy people who have it. I just can't

make the leap. I remember as a kid, my father died when I was young, and that was unexplainable to me. The God of the Old Testament, I didn't like things he did. "Abraham, sacrifice your son." That always bothered me as a kid. I remember thinking, Why would he do that to Abraham? As a test? So I said to myself, I don't know. I just don't know. That's still true to this day."

Let me tell you something, you have my permission to ask any question you want. Better yet, you have God's permission. Proverbs 25:2 says, **"It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, but the glory of kings is to search out a matter."** Do you have questions? Search it out. What you will discover is that other people had the same questions.

III. The disciples lack humility vv.46-48

So we're seeing that the disciples are a work in progress. They lack faith and they lack understanding. Another thing they lack is humility. Look at what happens next.

"An argument started among them as to which of them might be the greatest. But Jesus, knowing what they were thinking in their heart, took a child and stood 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 the one who is least among all of you, this is the one who is great'" (vv. 46-48).

The timing of this is incredible, isn't it? Jesus is talking about the fact that he's going to offer himself up for our sins and the disciples are haggling over which one of them is the greatest! But it makes sense. Since they didn't understand Jesus' role as the Suffering Savior they certainly couldn't grasp the implications that had for them as his disciples. They were still thinking of the Messiah only in terms of his triumphant kingdom, assuming that there would be some very important appointments made in his Cabinet, and they would be prime candidates.

You have to wonder how this argument got started. Maybe it was one of the three guys who got to be up on the mountain with Jesus. "Hey, the three of us are clearly a step ahead of your guys." Sometimes we do that. God gives us a wonderful experience with him and we turn it into a source of pride. Or perhaps it was their recent failure to heal the boy. Maybe they were trying to find someone to blame and that turned into an argument over their abilities: "Thomas, if you would have just let me take charge of that situation it would have gone differently!"

We do this today. We do it in and out of the church. It's very subtle, of course, because we know what Jesus said about this sort of thing. But we compare ourselves with others. We're very aware of the pecking order. We covet the important positions. We let people know WHO we know: 'Well, I was with so and so last week.' Or we let people know that we're IN the know, "Well, Bill

told me all about what's going on with Bob and Lisa." Sometimes we do this in kind of a reverse way. We act very humble. Jesus said to become the servant of all, and we take pride in doing that. But it's true what someone has said: "You know whether or not you're a servant by how you act when you're treated like one."

One of the things to notice here is that pride will almost always spoil the unity of the church. When we start playing these games dissension is right around the corner. How many Bible studies and ministries and churches have been destroyed by power struggles? A lot!

Jesus offers the remedy for this kind of thing by way of an object lesson. He takes hold of a nearby child. In those days, children had no status. It was said, "Morning sleep, midday wine, chattering with children and tarrying in places where men of common people assemble, destroy a man." Later in Luke we will see that the disciples considered Jesus too important to receive children and tried to send them away. The disciples figured, as we do, that greatness is determined by who you hang out with. But a child is powerless. A child can really do nothing to increase your status.

So Jesus takes a child and presents them with two opposite figures – himself who was everything to them and a child who was nothing to them. Then he issues a challenge: "If you welcome a child you welcome me and not just me but the one who sent me." He's not saying they would find him by being nice to children. He's saying that how we relate to those who have no status or power is a good indication of how we relate to both him and his Father who sent him. Just ask yourself, who do you welcome to dinner? Greatness is found in those who are willing to welcome the least among us.

I'll tell you what, we will be surprised in heaven. We'll be surprised at who the great ones are. You think it will be the pastors of large churches and missionaries and presidents of large ministries. No. It will be that woman (you can't remember her name) who served in the two year old class for 27 years. It will be that single man. You went over to his apartment one day and saw photos on his refrigerator of five different children he sponsors through World Vision. You would have never known.

IV. The disciples lack tolerance vv.49-50

Are you starting to feel better? The disciples are a work in progress, just like us. They lack faith. They lack understanding. And they lack humility. But there is one more thing. Look at vv. 49-50.

"John answered and said, 'Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name; and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow along with us.' But Jesus said to

him, **'Do not hinder him; for he who is not against you is for you.'**"

John may be thinking, "Jesus, I'm all for welcoming children. But I have a real problem with this guy who is casting out demons in your name. We don't even know this guy! I mean, we've been hanging with you for two years. A few of us just saw you in your glory. Shouldn't he have to be part of our group first? He might mess this whole operation up. What if he doesn't use our methods. That might confuse people." It's kind of funny, whoever this person was, he was successfully doing the very thing the disciples had just failed to do!

We're like this, you know. We get real proud about our church, our group, our organization. When we hear about how God is using some other church or some other group, deep down we resent it. Sometimes we hide it behind a concern for the truth: "Well, their doctrine is a little different than ours. That could really cause some problems." But notice doctrine wasn't the issue here. Whoever this person was, he did it in Jesus' name. But not only do we resent their success, deep down, if we're honest, we delight in their demise.

It's easy to be competitive with other Christians and hide that behind a cloak of righteous concerns about their ministry. Most of us have heard by now that Peninsula Covenant Church right over in Redwood City is going through a tough time right now. One of their youth pastors has been arrested for molesting two of the kids in their youth group. How do you feel about that? It would be easy for me to think, "Great, maybe we'll get a few of their people over here. I mean, those people really need to hear good expository preaching." But that would be so wrong and so foolish. What happened there could happen anywhere and it reflects on all of us in the Christian community. I know their pastor, Gary Gadini, and he's a great guy. Two years ago he lost his brother, a guy I went to college with, in a biking accident. Now this! I know this is tearing his heart out. As a matter of fact, I'm going to stop my message for a minute so we can just pray for him and that church right now.

You see, I did that because they need prayer, but also because we need to remember what Jesus says, "he who is not against you is for you." There are so many churches and ministries here on the Peninsula who are not a part of our organization but they're not against us either. In many cases, we're trying to accomplish the same thing. We may go about it a little differently, but that's okay. If they are Christ-centered and teaching the word of God, don't hinder them. If you have come here from another

church, you should examine your attitude towards that church. Is it right, or is it in the spirit of competitiveness and rivalry that we see here in John? You know, we've been helped by churches who had that attitude towards us. I hear about people all the time who came to our church because PBC down in Palo Alto told them to come here since they live closer. Here is the bottom line. If we're serving the King, we ALL need each other. There is too much to do on the Peninsula to be competing for sheep.

CONCLUSION

Isn't this great? Aren't you encouraged? I am. Here we have these disciples and they are such a work in progress. They lack faith. They lack understanding. They lack humility. And they lack tolerance. But these are the ones that Jesus would take with him to Jerusalem. These are the guys he would ask to pray for him in the garden when he sweat drops of blood. These are the guys he would commission, saying, "Go into all the world and make disciples."

That's encouraging because we know how we're the same way. We're a work in progress and God doesn't cast us aside because we fail in the same way the disciples did. But let me leave you with this: Don't let his patience and his kindness with you in any one of these areas make you less committed to change. Because he doesn't reveal these things to you so you can stay the same; he reveals these things to you because he loves you enough to poke you and prod you towards change. Listen to what the apostle Paul asks in Romans 2:4, **"Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?"** God is so kind and forbearing and patient with us, but for what purpose? God's kindness is meant to lead us to repentance, to change. So in any one of these areas you may have to say, "Lord, forgive me for my lack of faith. Now help me to change." Or "Lord forgive me for my lack of understanding. Help me to ask the hard questions." Or "Lord, forgive me for my pride. Help me to associate with the lowly." Or "Lord, forgive me for my intolerant, competitive spirit. Help me to encourage and support those who serve you, wherever they're found."

We're a work in progress. The operative word is "progress." God is so kind to us and so patient with us. But he is NOT content to let us stay the way we are.

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