

When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them and some scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. ¹⁶He asked them, “What are you arguing about with them?” ¹⁷Someone from the crowd answered him, “Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak, ¹⁸and 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.” ¹⁹He answered them, “You faithless generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.” ²⁰And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. ²¹Jesus asked the father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. ²²It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, help us! Have compassion on us!” ²³Jesus said to him, “If you are able! All things can be done for the one who believes.” ²⁴Immediately the father of the child cried out, “I believe; help my unbelief!” ²⁵When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!” ²⁶After 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.” ²⁷But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. ²⁸When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?” ²⁹He said to them, “This kind can come out only through prayer.”

I think many of you educated, smart, Biblical scholars realize what’s going on in today’s passage. Several of you are trained medical professionals. Based on the symptoms described in the Bible, what can we guess that this poor boy suffers from?

(Epilepsy)

Very often, what was attributed to demons in the first century can be explained these days in medical terms. We understand a lot more about the chemicals and neurons in the brain. We have EEGs and MRIs - tests to diagnose brain problems. Instead of calling for a spiritual intervention, we can now call a prescription in to our local pharmacy and find relief. Instead of calling people demon possessed, we can diagnose them and assign a

numeric code to a medical record that is accepted by insurance plans and all of “western medicine” knows what we’re talking about.

But in Jesus’ day, many of his healings were attributed to his power to cast out demons, and that’s true in the healing story we have today. A young boy has a demon, and it causes him to fall down and clench his jaw and his muscles become tight. He’s lost his speech and he’s fallen into water and into fire. It’s a dangerous situation for the boy and his family.

Have you ever known anyone who has seizures? I went to seminary with Michael, a former Marine who had had a traumatic brain injury. He went to seminary to be a youth minister. He was awesome with kids. We co-coached a basketball team, and I just thought the world of this young man. One day as we were sitting together in a Greek class, he asked to be excused. He said he didn’t feel well, and as soon as he stood up, he fell to the floor and had a seizure. A classmate and I caught him on his way down and held on to him. By the time the paramedics arrived, he was coming to, but he didn’t remember anything, and he slept for the next 30 hours at the VA.

He knew his life would never be easy. It wasn’t his first or his last seizure. Who would hire a guy with seizures to work with youth? When would his next seizure come? What if they got worse? He couldn’t drive himself. He couldn’t always get things done on time, but he was so good and kind and smart, and faithful.

I wish I could have prayed a demon out of him and restored him like Jesus did for that little boy in our story.

Instead I felt as helpless and frustrated as the disciples who couldn’t heal him, and the father of the boy who pleaded, “If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.”

And then, about a year later, I read a book. I brought it with me today. It’s called *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. It’s the true story about a girl named Lia. Her family escaped from Laos when the communists overtook the country in 1975. Lia was born in California, in a hospital, and was a perfectly healthy baby.

But when she was three months old, she had her first seizure. Her parents, who spoke no English, didn’t panic. They recognized the seizure as a spiritual sign of a blessing in which “the spirit catches you and you fall down.”

In their culture, “Seizures are thought to be evidence that the person has the power to perceive things other people cannot see, that they have an intuitive sympathy for the suffering of others, and can become healers themselves.” Her seizures, and she had more

than twenty in the span of a few months, were evidence to her parents that their little girl was chosen to be not a person with a medical disability to be pitied but a person with a unique gift to be honored.

The book describes the conflict that was born out of the clash between the Hmong culture and their spiritual understanding of Lia's symptoms as a gift and American medicine and social services, which fought to control Lia's seizures with hospital admissions, medications, and even, temporarily, placing her with an English speaking, white, American, medically compliant family. Book group, this would be a good one to read together!

But even today, we can ask ourselves what we believe. Is a seizure a problem caused by a demon, a medical condition that requires prescription management, or a sign of a spiritual gift? Our belief, our culture, and our spiritual perspective changes everything, doesn't it?

And then, to add to our confusion about what we believe, we hear the father say something beautiful and complicated to Jesus. He begins with, "If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." Then Jesus replies, "*If* you are able! All things can be done for the one who believes." And "immediately, the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!"

It's one of my very favorite, most brutally honest responses in all of scripture. "I believe; help my unbelief!"

Growing up, I didn't understand what the father was saying, or the extent of God's grace. I mean, who really does, but as a younger person, I didn't appreciate the father's humility. I grew up hard on myself and assumed God was hard on me, too. Anything less than a 95 on a school assignment was shameful. Anything less than perfection was failure.

And that's how I understood faith, too. God sent Jesus to die for us, and we didn't deserve it. I was unworthy. The church told me certain things, and I couldn't express doubt. Couldn't ask questions. I had to be all in, even when I didn't fully understand it or believe it myself. I could never admit that I had unbelief. Not even a little bit.

A lot of us think that being a Christian means having complete faith. We think it means that we're always 100% sure, 100% confident, 100% the model Christian – whatever that is. Most people I know don't fit that description. Most people struggle with doubts a lot of the time.

"I believe – help my unbelief!" That is the reality of being a Christian, a great deal of the time. We *do* believe. We believe in God. We believe in Jesus Christ. We believe at some

level in God's power. But we all *struggle* – with doubts, with fears, with disappointing experiences.

Most people I know, if you give them time to be honest, would say that they believe part of the time, and they don't believe, or they struggle to believe, part of the time.

David Roche is the author of a book called "The Church of 80% Sincerity". He says that most of the time he's a Christian and a believer, but part of the time he just doesn't feel he qualifies. He says, his church is the church for recovering perfectionists because 80% is about as good as most of us are going to get. 80% sincere in our belief. 80% compassionate. 80% honest, pretty good in an election year. The rest of the time, he says, we're not failing, we're being authentic, normal human beings, and we shouldn't beat ourselves up for being the people we are.

God knows that 80% of the time, when someone pulls out in front of us, we calmly hit the brakes and go on about our day, but 20% of the time . . . we tell the other driver how we feel, even though they can't hear us. And God loves us anyway.

We know that 80% of the time, we're happy to go to church, but 20% of the time, we'd rather sleep in or get something done around the house or go golfing or whatever it is you would rather do on a Sunday morning.

And 80% of the time, we trust in a loving God who hears our prayers and has universe-creating power and in Jesus who did miracles, and 20% of the time, we wonder if God's given up on us or if we've been duped all together. 80% of the time, we believe; and 20% of the time, we doubt. "I believe – help my unbelief!"

Is that something to be ashamed of? No!

I think the best thing we can do when we're in our 20% is to be honest about it, give ourselves grace, and not expect perfection from ourselves or others. What matters is that we acknowledge the struggle, admit to the tension, and lean into the vulnerability of not being sure of anything, even when we're confused and desperate.

I used to think that doubt was shameful, sinful even, but one of my favorite authors is Anne Lamott, and she has a brilliant friend, an Episcopal priest named Father Tom. Father Tom says, "The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns."

The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. The opposite of faith is not unbelief but blind obedience. Faith and doubt are not mutually exclusive. They're like peanut butter and jelly. We can doubt that creation happened in six days as it says in Genesis and still

have faith. We can doubt that Jonah lived inside a big fish for three days and still have faith. We can get upset at God because Laurie Chipperfield had cancer three times in her life and still have faith.

Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness, the discomfort. Faith includes not understanding everything and having lots of unanswered questions. Friends, if that's true, then maybe we have a lot more faith than we realized. I don't know about you, but when I look around, I see a lot of mess and discomfort, and still I believe. I believe the little boy in our scripture today suffered, but I don't believe he was possessed by a demon. I believe that Jesus healed him, but I don't believe I could pray away epilepsy. I believe that Michael and the little girl Lia were both blessed spiritually, but I don't believe it was because of or in spite of their seizures. I believe that the scriptures are holy wisdom, holy words, but I don't believe they're inerrant. I believe organized religion has bought Jesus and a helpful faith community to millions of people, but I don't believe it has protected the most vulnerable or supported the role of women. I believe that God is all knowing and all powerful, and I believe faithful people suffer from awful medical conditions, but I don't believe God planned for people to have them or is powerless to stop them.

So where exactly does that leave me? Where does that leave you? All I can say is, "I believe! Help my unbelief!" Amen.