

Anger, Jealousy, and Love
Mark 9:14-29

What is wrong with these disciples? Back in chapter 6, just before He sent them out on a short-term missions trip, Jesus gave them “power over unclean spirits,” over demons. Moreover, on that very trip, we read that they did in fact “cast out many devils.” So what’s wrong now? Why can’t they cast the demon out of this boy?

And think about this. Just since the beginning of chapter 8, they saw Jesus miraculously multiply seven loaves – they even handed out the food to four thousand hungry people. They saw Jesus heal a blind man, and they heard Peter’s confession that Jesus was, in fact, the Messiah sent by God. And to top it all off, three of them even saw Him in glory on the mountaintop, immediately before the events recorded here. They saw all this and they knew all this. And yet they are still, in Jesus’ words, a faithless generation. They are still unable to cast out this demon.

But it’s worse than that. Immediately before and immediately after this passage, when Jesus tries again to explain what’s going to happen to Him, how He’s going to suffer and be treated with contempt and be killed and then rise from the dead, they don’t understand what He’s talking about and they are afraid to ask Him about it. Faithless? That about sums it up.

But the disciples weren’t the only faithless ones in this story, were they? Look at verse 22 – when the demon-possessed boy’s father asks Jesus to cast out the demon, he speaks in the most hesitant, the most skeptical of tones: “If you can do anything...” And when Jesus challenges him in verse 23, he even admits his unbelief in verse 24. Truly, faithlessness was rampant during the time of Jesus – no wonder He condemns the whole “faithless generation.”

But such faithlessness was nothing new, was it? Remember what we read this morning about the people of Israel at the time of Moses? “They have corrupted themselves; *They are* not His children, Because of their blemish: A perverse and crooked generation.” Moses said, “For *they are* a perverse generation, Children in whom *is* no faith.”

Yes, how faithless were the people Moses led through the wilderness. For just as the disciples ate of the miraculous loaves and fishes, so the people ate God’s miraculous food, manna, in the wilderness. But better yet, God was getting ready to bring them into the land He had promised them, a land where food was plentiful. As we read in his song, Moses describes it this way:

“He made him draw honey from the rock, And oil from the flinty rock; Curds from the cattle, and milk of the flock, With fat of lambs; And rams of the breed of Bashan, and goats, With the choicest wheat; And you drank wine, the blood of the grapes.”

Yes, God had blessed His people richly in the wilderness, and He would bless them even more richly when they came into the Promised Land. But how would this faithless and perverse generation respond to God's grace? Moses' song continues, both looking back to the way the people had behaved in the wilderness and looking forward to how they would behave in the Promised Land:

"They provoked Him to jealousy with foreign *gods*; With abominations they provoked Him to anger. They sacrificed to demons, not to God, *To gods* they did not know, *To new gods*, new arrivals That your fathers did not fear."

In fact, they began worshipping other gods right after the One True God came down on Mt. Sinai in a cloud of smoke and spoke the Ten Commandments to them. And just as Jesus descended the Mount of Transfiguration to find a faithless generation, when Moses came down from Mt. Sinai with the tablets of the law, the Ten Commandments in his hands, what did he find? The people of God were molding a calf of gold. In their faithlessness they had turned away from the Rock who begot them. With the thunder of Sinai still fresh in their ears, they forgot the God that fathered them. A faithless generation.

No wonder that God was angry with His people in the wilderness. Moses says that "when the Lord saw it, He spurned them, because of the provocation of His sons and His daughters." No wonder God allowed that whole generation to die rather than to enter the land He had promised to His people. What father wouldn't be angry if he were shown such defiance by his children? What lover wouldn't be jealous to see his beloved giving her love and her trust to anyone else?

Oh, we understand this anger. And so we shouldn't be surprised that Jesus would be angry at his equally willful, defiant, faithless, clueless followers. After all, it was only in the previous few verses that the Father again spoke out of a cloud on top of a mountain, bearing direct witness that Jesus is the Son of God, commanding them to "Listen to Him!" But even though He had given them power over demons, they would not listen, they would not believe – they would not pray. No, instead of trusting Him, they continued to entertain their own dreams of power and glory. Instead of admitting their weakness and praying that God would remove the demon, they continued to act in their own strength, fruitlessly trying to do ministry on their own. In short, they continued to follow Jesus with their feet, but their hearts were far removed from Him.

No wonder Jesus was angry with them: "O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you?" Yes, we can understand why He would say that to them.

But I wonder if He might say the same thing to us. For if God blessed the ancient people of Israel, how much greater have been His blessings on us! How much wealthier, how much healthier, how much safer we American Christians are!

And if Christ had revealed Himself to the disciples at this point in the story, how much greater is His revelation to us! How much more clearly do we see God's marvelous plan of redemption. For while the disciples remained confused and frightened, we understand what Jesus meant when He spoke of His betrayal, of His death and of His resurrection.

Yes, we have been so much more richly blessed, but are we any more trusting than the people in the wilderness? Are we any more faithful or prayerful than the disciples were? Are our lives any more focused on God's glory? Sure – our steeple points to God, saying that our trust is in Him, but is that true of us in our hearts? Do we give God the time and devotion He deserves, or are our hearts, our minds, our interests fixed elsewhere? In our safety and prosperity, have we also forgotten the Lord our God? Even though He has loved us so much, have we also turned away from Him, embracing sin instead of God?

Now, I know. We usually define sin in a legal sense – doing things that we ought not to do or leaving undone the things we ought to have done. But at the end of the day, those are simply symptoms, for it really doesn't matter what form sin takes. It doesn't matter if it is outward or inward, public or private, heinous or socially acceptable. At root, all sin is relational, a turning of the soul away from God. At root, all sin is faithless, refusing to trust God and His law. At root, all sin is idolatry, embracing the self and the desires of the self at the expense of the obedience we owe to God.

Moses put it this way: "Do you thus deal with the LORD, O foolish and unwise people? *Is* He not your Father, *who* bought you? Has He not made you and established you?"

And so can we doubt that God has every right to be just as angry with us as He was with the disciples, with the father of the demon-possessed boy, and with the people in the wilderness? Are we any more faithful than any of them were?

But the good news is that this isn't just a story about God's anger and judgment. It is also a story about a Father's mercy. For if the faithlessness of the disciples is so starkly displayed before us, so is the plight of this demon-possessed boy and his desperate father.

I suppose it's only those who have had sick children who know the poignant mixture of love and grief and despair this father has known for years. This is his child. And day after day he has to watch this child, his child, being brutally attacked by a demon. He has to watch this child, his child, go into convulsions and foam at the mouth and throw himself down on the floor in dangerous places. And after it's all over, this father has to pick up his child, and hold him close and nurse his cuts and bruises, and cry – and wait for it to happen again.

Some of you know this pain and despair firsthand. Some of you know what it's like to have loved ones you have to watch helplessly as they hurt themselves. Some of you know it's like to watch your children or your husbands or your wives enslaved, perhaps not to demons, but to

drugs or alcohol or sexual addiction. Some of you have had to watch these powerful forces seize your loved ones, throw them down and bruise them. And after it's all over, you know what it's like to hold them close and cry and wait for it to happen again.

Brothers and sisters, I would submit to you that this is a glimpse of what God goes through with His people. For Moses in his song says that the people in the wilderness provoked God "to jealousy with foreign gods; with abominations they provoked Him to anger." Why? "Is He not your Father, *who* bought you? Has He not made you and established you?"

Yes, sin makes God angry and jealous, as His people turn away from Him to whatever demons, to whatever idols strike our fancy. But I would submit to you that the reason God is so angry, the reason that God is so jealous, the reason that God is so passionate about sin is because God is so passionate about His children. The reason God takes sin so seriously is because God loves us in the same way that the father of this demon-possessed boy loved him. And the reason God takes sin so seriously is that, like that desperate father, God knows what chaos, what damage, what devastation sin brings into our lives, no matter what form it takes.

Yes, every time we turn away from Him, God knows the pain, the frustration, the anger and the jealousy of those whose loved ones are living in the grip of sin. Every time we suffer because we insist on clinging to our idols, God knows the anguish of this father whose only son was so cruelly tormented.

So, if this is a story about God's anger, and it is, and if this is a story about God's judgment, and it is, then it is also a story about God's heartache and heartbreak over sin.

And yet so great is God's desire for His enslaved people, so great is God's passion for those He loves that He chose to go through the anguish of this desperate father in a greater and deeper way. He was willing to deliver up His only Son Whom He loved, Jesus, to the hysterical crowd, to the brutal soldiers, to the cross itself.

And Jesus was willing to be betrayed by the very same faithless generation who continued to refuse to listen to Him. That's why Jesus said, "How long shall I be with you?" – it wasn't just an expression of His anger, it was also a prophecy. For He would in fact leave them very soon. Very soon He would be betrayed by these very same men precisely so that they might be released from their pride and arrogance that prevented them from doing effective ministry, from the sin and death that they had no idea were enslaving them.

Yes, Jesus cast out the demon and healed the boy, in spite of his father's faithlessness. Yes, at the end of his Song, Moses said that God would provide atonement for His land and His people, in spite of His people's sinfulness. Yes, God is determined to show mercy, to bring wholeness to His people because of His great love for us. But how great a price this love would demand. How great a price this love would pay.

Christian, look on the rage, the frustration, the anger, the jealousy of your God. Turn away from your self-destructive sins to the One who can heal you. Turn to the One who would rather die than spend eternity without you. Turn to the God who loves you with a love beyond measure, beyond degree. And give yourself to the One Who gave Himself for you.