

Sermon for Sunday, August 5, 2012
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Caring for the Truth
Mark 9:14-27

Mark 9:14 When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. 15 As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him. 16 "What are you arguing with them about?" he asked. 17 A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. 18 Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not." 19 "O unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me." 20 So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. 21 Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered. 22 "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." 23 "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes." 24 Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" 25 When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." 26 The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." 27 But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

The Roman historian Tacitus said Germans always drank wine while holding councils, because they believed no one could lie effectively when drunk. I wonder if they could think, plan, or speak effectively either, but let's lay that aside. The ancient saying "in vino veritas" - in wine there is truth – labels the issue. People hide what they think – and we hide more effectively when we have our wits. It's an old idea: Say what you think and it may lead to conflict. Be careful.

Yet people want to tell the truth. God has written his law into our hearts, so we want to obey: "You shall not bear false witness." Paul commanded Christians to "speak the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15). We all know the experience of carrying the burden of a painful truth. We want to share it with a trusted friend! And parents sometimes see a child – tearful or looking guilty and we ask, "Honey, is there something you want to tell me?" There often is, and they feel better afterward.

The sweep of Scripture shows how important, and yet difficult it is to tell the truth – especially if we want someone to hear something vital.

After David's terrible sin, stealing the wife of one of his soldiers, God sent Nathan the prophet to tell him the truth about what he had done. But not right away! Nathan told a story about a poor man with one sheep and a rich man, who had many. Yet the rich man took the poor man's one sheep and killed it. David was outraged. "That man deserves to die," the king roared. But Nathan poked his bony finger into David's chest - "You are the man" (2 Sam 12).

The Bible tells *painful but necessary* truths: We are rebels and sinners, who cannot reform ourselves. The gospels report that Jesus' disciples abandoned him in his hour of need. They hardly believed the report of the resurrection. The gospels say Jesus struggled in Gethsemane, asking the Father "If possible, let this cup pass." (Matt 26-27). The Bible is a painfully honest book. God is honest with us and we should be honest with him.

Humans often fail to tell the truth. The failure takes several forms. Some are blameless. We exaggerate and oversimplify without any desire to deceive. We say turn left when we mean turn right. Memory fails, so we recount an event incorrectly. We make promises that we don't keep because we didn't foresee an obstacle. "I'll be home by 6:30" – but there was a traffic jam. More ominously, we sometimes tell lies. But the most dangerous of all is self-deception, because that also leads us to deceive others.

In Mark 9, we see a man who told the truth. The event took place right after Jesus' transfiguration, when Peter, James and John saw Jesus in all his glory. But they come down the mountain and meet a crowd that gathered around a boy in distress. His father and disciples stand nearby. The other disciples had tried and failed to help the boy because they had "little faith." Yet it's honesty leads a powerful healing.

1. Honest faith in action (Mark 9:14-27)

While Jesus was on the mountain, a father brought his son to Jesus for healing. With Jesus gone, he presented his boy to the disciples, but they failed. Had they lost the ability to heal? A crowd gathered and the boy was at the center (9:17-18).

The father emerges from the pack and describes his plight to Jesus. He is respectful but candid. He kneels, calls Jesus Lord, and pleads for his son (9:17-18). His son suffers seizures, but the boy doesn't just fall down, he falls into fire or water. Whatever his disease, there was demonic activity behind it, and they want to destroy the lad.

Father says, "I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him" (9:17). This sounds like an accusation. The father stresses the inability of the disciples. He tells Jesus, "I brought my son to you" – singular, refers to Jesus alone - and "asked your disciples to cast it out" and they couldn't.

The father viewed Jesus' disciples as his representatives. In the absence of the master, they should do the master's work. Jesus had empowered the disciples to heal disease and cast out demons and they had succeeded. But not that day.

The failure is puzzling. Later, they asked "Why couldn't we drive it out?" Jesus replied, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer" (9:28-9). Maybe the disciples *presumed* on their power. Maybe they trusted themselves more than Jesus.

The same thing can happen to us. We can get mechanical. Even when we do the right things— read the Bible, volunteer, help a neighbor, comfort a friend - if there is little faith, there is little benefit. The disciples surely said the right words, took the right steps, but nothing happened because they had "little faith." Faith changes the world. Ritual doesn't.

So Jesus met a helpless boy, a shaken father, and feckless disciples. Jesus laments that he is surrounded by an "unbelieving generation." Jesus is weary of disciples who failed him again and again. Mark is honest about this. Jesus is exasperated and asks, "How long shall I put up with you?" (9:19). As someone said, Jesus experienced "all sinless human emotions." Quite a variety of them appear in the gospels. Some of them are *known to us* only as sinful passions. But the gospels are honest: Jesus became exasperated here and angry elsewhere.

Taking action

Jesus commands the people to bring him the boy. When the spirit saw Jesus, it threw the child into a fresh convulsion (9:19-20). This continued while Jesus and the father conversed (9:21-24). Jesus took his time, like a doctor calmly surveying a patient that is slowly turning blue. He asks diagnostic questions: "How long has he been like this?" (9:21). As if: "Describe the symptoms; what do we have here?"

The father explains, then pleads for help. The demon "has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us" (9:22). The disciples' earlier failure shook his confidence. The father brought the boy to Jesus; but only met the disciples. When Jesus' representatives failed, it seemed that Jesus failed. That caused the father's uncertainty and he is honest about his doubts – "If you can do anything... help us."

Jesus hears the father's doubt. It's important. He doesn't let it pass. He repeats it: "If you can"? What does he mean, "if you can"? Does he doubt Jesus's ability?" Mark says as for that "if you can," the issue is not whether Jesus can act, but whether the father believes. Jesus says, "All things are possible for the one who believes" (9:23). The issue is not God's ability but the father's capacity to trust in it. Scripture says, "nothing is impossible with God" (Gen. 18, Luke 1:37, 18:27; Mark 10:27).

The father answers: "I believe; help my unbelief" (Matt. 9:24). The crowd was getting unruly, so Jesus confronted power with power, rebuked the evil spirit, and commanded it to leave "and never enter him again" (9:25). The demon convulsed the boy one last time, then left. For a moment, he looked like a corpse. But Jesus took him by the hand and raised him up in a foretaste of the resurrection (9:26-27).

If we try to act in Jesus' name and fail, people may think Jesus failed. But when we show love and justice, we bless God's name. When Jesus healed the boy in our story, it surely strengthened the father's faith in Jesus' power!

For the disciples and the boy's father, robust faith is elusive. But we don't need robust faith. A little faith is enough if it relies on God. Faith and prayer are powerful, not by the strength of our faith but by God's strength. That's why Jesus says that with faith, "nothing is impossible" (Matt. 17:20).

The hallmark of this passage is its honesty. Mark tells it all, pleasant or not: The disciples lost their power. The father was at least half-way toward losing his faith. And Jesus lost his calm; he was exasperated. The passage teaches us to be honest – with self, with others, with God.

Are you honest with yourself?

There are many ways to say things that are false. In fact, humans often fail to tell the truth. Many failures are blameless. We exaggerate a little while telling a story or oversimplify while explaining something complex. We have no desire to deceive but we're not quite accurate. We make mistakes when memory fails. We have slips of the tongue. We say turn left when we mean turn right. We make promises we don't keep because we didn't foresee obstacles. We say we'll be home by six o'clock, but hit a traffic jam. We say we'll finish a project in a year, but we had foes.

Sometimes people also tell lies or manipulate the truth for selfish advantage. But self-deception may be most dangerous, because it necessarily leads us to deceive others too.

Sometimes we don't even know what honesty is. Is it dishonest to smile warmly at someone you dislike? When someone asks, "How are you doing?" can we say "OK," even if we're dying inside? Is it wrong to say "Good job" when the work was mediocre? Sometimes we have to simplify. But the great danger is the dishonesty of self-deception.

This summer I discovered that, depending how you count, God the Father or Jesus or a spouse asks this question ten to fifteen times: "Why are you..." then adds an emotional state. It's as though God or a spouse is saying, "I can see what you're feeling, but you can't. Your state makes no sense, but if you don't recognize it, nothing will change." These questions don't condemn, they explore.

- After the Lord rejected Cain's inadequate offering, "the LORD said to Cain, 'Why are you *angry*? Why is your face *downcast*?' (Gen. 4:6).
- A kind man named Elkanah had a wife who couldn't bear children. He asked her "Hannah, why are you *weeping*? Why don't you eat? Why are you *downhearted*? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?" (1 Sam. 1:8).
- In Psalms 42-43, the writer repeatedly asks himself, "Why are you *downcast*, O my soul? Why so *disturbed* within me?" (Psa. 42:5, 11; 43:5).
- When the disciples panic during a storm on Galilee, Jesus asks them, "Why are you so *afraid*?" (Matt. 8:26, Mark 4:40).
- After the resurrection, Jesus met two disciples on the road to Emmaus. He asked them, "Why are you *troubled*, and why do doubts rise in your minds?" (Luke 24:38).
- When certain Jewish leaders become irate over one of Jesus' healings, he asked, "Why are you *angry* with me for healing on the Sabbath?" (John 7:23).
- At a gathering of Christians a prophet said Paul would be imprisoned. Paul asked them, "Why are you *weeping* and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 21:8-14. cf. 2 Sam. 19:42, 1 Kgs. 21:5, Ezek. 21:7, John 20:13-15).

We know we don't see ourselves as clearly as we would like. Some people are too hard on themselves. But studies show that *most people* rate themselves higher than others rate them. We think we're a little more handsome, virtuous, talented, than others do. In other words, we fool ourselves.

If you aren't a believer, you may ask who is to judge. Do other people know us better than we know ourselves? Not always. But the Bible says we sin and when we do, we tend to excuse or justify ourselves instead of facing our mistakes and asking forgiveness. Apostle Paul says we "suppress the truth." We know the truth but we deny it, hide it from ourselves.

But the God of the Bible sees and knows all things. He knows us better than we know ourselves. That's why it is good for us to pray and meditate. We should pray this painful but necessary prayer, "Lord, show me my sin." If something comes to mind, confess it to God and try to change too.

Psalms 42-43 show a believer probing his feelings. Over and over he asks, "Why are you *downcast*, O my soul? Why so *disturbed* within me?" He corrects himself, "Hope in God." He calls God his refuge and remembers his love.

We can do the same. When we feel excited or tense, elated or discouraged, we can ask ourselves, "What am I feeling? Why? Are my feelings well grounded? Realistic or disordered? Am I missing something? Can I get this right through prayer? Can a trusted friend help me with this?"

A couple upsetting things happened to me, close together, one day. I knew I'd lost my equilibrium. So I found a friend and talked to him for 15 minutes. He listened, made a couple observations, and asked me a key question. Just what I needed! He helped me see myself, be honest with myself.

A couple weeks ago, we studied Jonah. The prophet preached in Ninevah and the people repented. As you recall, Jonah was angry when they repented because that meant God wouldn't judge them for their sins against Israel. While Jonah sulked in the desert outside the city, God gave him a shade plant. He was so glad. The next day the vine died. As the heat beat down on him, Jonah was so angry he asked God to take his life.

Clearly, Jonah isn't being honest with himself. His life's work is to call people to repentance. He is way off if he thinks he is right to care more about plants than people. So God questioned him: Are you sure you're getting this right? "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" Jonah replies [paraphrase] "Yep."

But God's knew Jonah had everything backward. He should have been glad so many sinners repented (Luke 15:7, 10). But no, he's angry because God spared the city. He doesn't care about Nineveh, but he is irate over the death of a shade plant. If he pitied a shade plant, surely he should have pitied the city: You pity this plant, for which you did not labor... And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?

Notice that the passage is open-ended. We don't know how Jonah responded, so we have to finish the story. Why? Because we can find ourselves in the same position. Let me ask: Do you ever get upset about the wrong things? Care too much about trivial things? Not enough about great issues? I do.

Remember that risky prayer, "Lord, show me my sin." Sometimes, we need friends or family. That's the case with Elkanah and Hannah. Hannah can't bear children. We understand her pain. But Elkanah senses that it's out of control. "Hannah, why are you *weeping*? Why don't you eat?" (1 Sam. 1:8).

Physically – The first area for honesty with ourselves

Let's take the question to some other areas. Are you honest about your health? Do you eat the way you should? Do you sleep or exercise as you should? Do you work to stay healthy? Do you care for the body God gave you? Or do you ignore problems and rely on pills to dull your pain, go to sleep, and calm down?

In family

In the family, are you helicopter parents? (If you have to ask...) One woman said: "I'm so devoted to my children, I'm smothering them. When they fell down when they were little, I picked them up and comforted them so fast, they hardly knew they had suffered. When they were older, I so wanted to protect them..., they never learned how to endure disappointment and defeat."

Are you honest with self about the way you treat your children? Your parents? Your husband or wife? Are you quitting on anyone, without facing it, saying so?

Work

Are you honest about your work? We serve and love people at work. But our attitudes can slip. Work can be an idol or a drudgery. We have to watch ourselves: How much do I work? Too much? As little as possible? How effectively? What are my true motives? Is my happiness or significance too closely tied to my work? If you've decided you have the wrong job, are you willing to look for something else? Develop new skills? Take a risk? A pay cut?

Last week eight Olympic athletes were disqualified for deliberately losing badminton matches in order to get more favorable matches in the next round. To their credit, the coaches and players confessed and apologized. They said "We lost sight of the Olympic motto – higher, stronger, faster – in the quest to win."

Honest with God

Mark 9 is honest. Honest about the disciple's failures, about Jesus' exasperation, about the father's doubts: "I believe, help my unbelief." The account hinges on father's honesty. He didn't hide, he told the truth. It was the way he came to Jesus, the way his son found healing.

Craig Keener wrote a book on the historical Jesus; in the preface he explains that as a young man he was an atheist. His central objection to faith in Jesus was this: Most Americans claim to follow Jesus, yet it makes no difference in their life. If Christians and non-Christians live the same way, why believe? We say Christ is King, but western Christians don't live like it. "Faith" has to be let us share in Jesus' resurrection life, not just ideas. Real faith has to be holistic, but that's rare.

But one day Keener encountered the risen Christ in a personal way. I "came to the conviction that he is in fact alive [and] that the reality of Jesus rises or falls not on the behavior of his professed followers, but on Jesus himself." He came to faith but he had to work through his doubts. What about you? Are you honest with God? About your faith and your doubt?

Are you honest with yourself in general? About your joys and sorrows? Your obedience and your sin? It's the only way to live. The gospels are so honest – Jesus was angry, exasperated some days, distressed before the cross. There is one way to holistic life with Christ. We go through the hard questions, with honesty.

The same thing can happen to us, with our emotions and every other faculty. Our ears are open but we fail to see, our ears hear but do not listen, our mind reasons but does not understand. Emotionally we lose proper self-awareness and cannot see how tense or upset or excited we are, until someone points it out. We can also hide our emotions, first from ourselves, then from others, so that no one knows what we are feeling. How can anyone grow emotionally if they neither perceive nor understand their own emotions? When someone labels our emotions for us, we should listen.

This is a classic question: What can God do? If he is all-powerful, why doesn't he do more? Why did he allow the Holocaust? Two world wars? The communist purges and starvations in China and Russia? The murder of Christians in Darfur? In the Crusades why did God allow warriors to claim religion as a cloak for violence? These are honest questions. Two quick answers:

1. If humans have genuine choice, evil is a possible result. He sometimes allows humans to go their own way. (Rom 1:18 ff)

2. God can bring good from evil. In Genesis 50:20 Joseph tells brothers, "You intended it for evil" – selling me into slavery - but God intended it for good" to save many lives. In our experience, God often uses an injury or loss, honestly faced, to speak to us.

The disciples show weaknesses often. After his transfiguration, Jesus instructs them: "Tell no one" until after the resurrection (Matt. 9:9). The need for silence is understandable. During his Transfiguration, Jesus spoke of his death and resurrection. They are always joined in Jesus' mind, for he must pass from glory to suffering to glory again. When it's complete, the disciples will understand. Then he will permit them to speak. When they see that the path of Christ leads through suffering and rejection then they will comprehend the transfiguration.

Around this time Jesus repeatedly gathered the twelve and told them he must die: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him and after three days he will rise" (9:31). Jesus said he must die (Matt. 16:21). He says he will die (17:23). He will suffer at the ends of Jewish leaders and someone will betray him into their hands (17:22).

The disciples never understood Jesus' death until after his resurrection. Mark says they didn't understand and were afraid to ask (Mk. 9:32). Therefore let us praise asking. There is virtue in asking. We may feel that others know more, that we should know better, that we're embarrassed at our ignorance. Everyone has to start somewhere. I couldn't really type until I was thirty-two or thirty-three. When I got my first computer I had to admit my ignorance and get help.

So it is with the faith. To start learning about Jesus and discipleship, we have to ask questions. You may hate to admit that you don't know what Jesus is talking about or who he is or why his death is so important or why he cares for you. Please ask. Pray. Read the Bible. Talk to a pastor or Christian friend. Truth can't enter the heart unless it enters our minds.