



# Kyle Jones' Sermon

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**SERMON – 16<sup>TH</sup> PENTECOST**

*I BELIEVE THAT I CANNOT BELIEVE (CONFIRMATION SUNDAY)*

MARK 9:14-29; JAMES 3:1-12; ISAIAH 50:4-10

**SEPTEMBER 12, 2021**

*Grace, mercy, and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Our gospel lesson for today can be a little off-putting at first, particularly when we remember that we're lifting up four students from our congregation as they make a public affirmation of their baptism and confirm the faith God has worked in them. But, as we take a closer look, there may not be a better, more resonant gospel lesson for such an occasion. First, because we see reflected in it the six chief parts of Martin Luther's Small Catechism. (And what's a Confirmation sermon without a little teaching on the catechism.) And second, because it encapsulates the life of every Christian, which our confirmation students are continuing in after coming to this milestone.

To begin with, our Gospel lesson from Mark flashes us back to Moses's initial descent from Mount Sinai. In Exodus 32, Moses came down the mountain, ten commandments in hand, to a chaotic disaster. While he was on Mount Sinai, the people turned away from the God who rescued them from slavery in Egypt to worship a golden calf that Moses' own brother, Aaron, made for them.

He found their lack of faith so disturbing he smashed the tablets on which God wrote his commandments; leading to the classic Bible joke, "how many commandments did Moses break? ... all of them."

In Mark 9, Jesus (with Peter, James, and John) comes down from the mountain of his transfiguration to find a similar scene. As with their forefathers, idolatry and unbelief have run amuck among Jesus' disciples, the religious leaders, and even the crowd.

In their fight over how to cast out a demon afflicting a young boy which neither group can do, they seem to have given up any hope in God (or Jesus in the case of the disciples). They may not be worshipping a physical golden calf, but they worship their own knowledge and abilities, despite their obvious failure in this case.

Luther defines an idol as anything we place our trust in. For him, all the commandments can be summed up in the first: you shall have no other gods. What does this mean? We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things. This explanation reverberates throughout the rest of his explanations of the commandments; each one starts, "we should fear and love God so that..."

Faith in God is at the heart of the commandments and the lack of faith, or unbelief, is the chief sin from which all others spring. When we fail to fear, love, and trust in God, we fail to love our neighbor.

This is what has happened among the disciples and the religious leaders; they're busy looking to themselves and arguing with each other. And caught in the middle is a desperate dad who cries out to Jesus from the crowd, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth, and becomes rigid. I ask your disciples to drive out the spirit but they could not."

Jesus's exasperated reply (which you can almost feel) says as much when he calls them an unbelieving or faithless generation. And before we think too highly of ourselves: we too have been faithless and still struggle to fear, love, and trust in God above all things and so love our neighbor.

In both the exchange between Jesus and the father *and* in Jesus' casting out of the evil spirit, we see four parts of the catechism on display. There is no direct teaching on Holy Communion in this story, but we do see reflected Luther's teaching on receiving it in a worthy manner. Here is Luther's last question on Holy Communion in the Small Catechism and his explanation. "Who receives this sacrament worthily? Answer: Fasting and bodily preparation are certainly fine outward training. But that person is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words: 'Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.'"

This plays out in verses 20-23. They bring the boy to Jesus and the evil spirit throws him down into convulsions and he starts foaming at the mouth. Jesus, like the great physician he is, asks how long the boy has been like this. The father answers "From childhood," and adds that the demon has often tried to kill him by throwing him into fire or water. Then the father pleads, "If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." The sassy Jesus strikes back, "If you can?' Everything is possible for one who believes."

To receive the forgiveness of our sins through Jesus' body and blood under the bread and wine in Holy Communion requires faith. Jesus' body and blood are present in Holy Communion whether we believe it or not. Likewise, Jesus can heal this boy whether his father believes him or not. But he calls the father out for his lack of faith at this moment, and in turn, calls out his disciples, the religious leaders, and the crowd too.

Then we hear the father's almost breathtaking reply to Jesus' sassy remarks which reflect beautifully Luther's teaching on the Apostles' Creed: "I do believe; help my unbelief." As the father's confession is the heart of this story, so too is the Apostles' Creed the heart of the catechism, especially when we come to Luther's explanation of the third article of the Creed, "I believe in the Holy Spirit." What does it mean to believe in God, the Holy Spirit? Luther explains: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus' Christ, my Lord or come to him." In other words, we confess what this father confesses. We confess: I believe that I cannot believe.

Luther's explanation goes on, "but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith." Faith is not our work, but what God works in us by his Holy Spirit. We do not come to believe in the saving work of God, through his Son, Jesus Christ by our own efforts. The Holy Spirit calls us by the good news of the Gospel, that our sins are freely forgiven on account of Jesus' death and resurrection for us.

The father's confession, like all confessions, is a double confession. When we confess that we believe in God and his saving work for us in Jesus, we also confess a reality about ourselves as sinful people and about God as our gracious forgiver. In the same breath, the father confesses his faith and his chief sin, his lack of faith.

Luther explains confession of sin in the Small Catechism this way: "Confession has two parts. First, that we confess our sins, and second that we receive absolution, that is, forgiveness." As the words of absolution are spoken and deliver the forgiveness they proclaim, so too does Jesus speak and command the demon leave.

We cannot help but see the parallels to baptism and the Small Catechism's teaching on it here Jesus speaks and the demon leaves; it is God's word added to the water that makes baptism what it is and gives baptism its power.

Jesus raises the boy up from what many in the crowd thought was a state of death; the Small Catechism reminds us that baptism drowns the old sinner within us and raises us up to new life in Christ.

Luther is quick to quote Paul's words in Romans six here, "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that through the glory of the Father, we too may have new life."

This story also shows us what this new life in Christ looks like. Later on, the disciples asking Jesus privately why they failed so spectacularly and Jesus replies, "This kind can come out only by prayer." Jesus' answer is a bit mysterious until we realize that prayer, as taught by Jesus in the Lords' Prayer and expounded upon by Luther in the Small Catechism, is faith enacted in its proper direction, toward God.

The disciples failed to do what the boy's father did. His confession was also a prayer. By calling out his lack of faith, Jesus turns the father away from himself and to the one who can truly help him.

In praying to God, especially in the Lord's Prayer, we do the same. To pray to God as our Heavenly Father is to call upon God in faith, not only as divine and therefore able to do all we ask, but also to call upon him as our good and gracious Father as we are commanded in the second commandment and confess of him in the Apostles' Creed: eager to hear our prayers and give us all that we need, as he has given himself entirely to us in Christ.

To pray for God's name to be hallowed among us is to pray that we may continually hear the Gospel of Christ crucified for the forgiveness of our sins. To pray for God's kingdom to come among us is to pray for the faith that comes from hearing the Gospel, produced by the Holy Spirit, and that believes and trusts that Christ died for the forgiveness of our sins too. To pray for God's will to be done among us is to pray that God would sustain and keep us in the one true faith and disrupt every scheme of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature that would cause us to doubt it.

My favorite quote regarding Luther's Small Catechism comes from theologian Robert Kolb, who said, "The catechism is not really learned until life strikes." The Small Catechism's chief concern is teaching the basics of the Bible. Namely, what does it look like if we believe in the forgiveness of sins? Or said another way, what does it mean to have faith in Jesus?

Faith in Jesus is at the core of our gospel lesson as we see the negative realities of life strike a father and his son. Life strikes us too. And in those moments of wavering and doubt, we, like the boy's father, can cry out and confess to our heavenly Father, I believe; help my unbelief!

In those moments when you're wrestling with faith and God feels distant, remember, you cannot wrestle with something that is far away. Take heart, God is near; and he is here for you. **AMEN.**