



This morning we conclude the 4-part series of messages *Living In A Divided World*. Each time we come to a point in which the level of contentiousness and division seems to have gone about as far as it can, the line is pushed out further. And, to be honest, as I have reflected on these messages this week, I have concluded that I don't know that I have had much to offer that has contributed in any meaningful way to how we deal with the divisions in our world. It seems, actually, to have been somewhat of an exercise in futility, but then, I think a lot of what we do as God's people probably seems like an exercise in futility, because we don't generally see the ways in which God is working, nor do we often understand the ways in which God is working. But, in spite of what seems like long odds and much futility, we believe and trust that God's work does continue on. I do believe that, and I trust that.

For this final message I gave a lot of thought not only to what I would say, but also a lot of thought to the subject matter, because I told you at the beginning of this series that I would start from the furthest point out and work my way backwards. The first message, then, began with the larger-scale question of division in our world, moving from there to the divisions within churches and within the larger church, then on to the divisions in families, and now, to where we stand as individuals in this world of divisiveness. And in that topic, where do we begin? Where in the world do we start? After thinking about it for quite a while, I chose the Scripture text that we will read in a few moments. I chose this passage because I have always found it to be very fascinating, especially the last phrase of the passage – *I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!*"

When I think about the divides in our world, perhaps the greatest of those is the divide between belief and unbelief. It is large-scale – because it spans the world – but it is small-scale as well, as the question *do you believe in God?* cuts across every individual life. *Do you believe in God?* That's the great question of life, isn't it? Because how one answers that question has all manner of consequences, one of which is, *how does that belief express itself in our lives?*

I'm going to make what I think is a very safe assumption – as you are here, I assume you believe in God. Seems a safe enough assumption, doesn't it? But I'm going to make a second assumption as well, and it is this – your belief, your faith, has probably changed over time. And, maybe your faith has wavered a bit at times. Maybe it has wavered a lot at times. Maybe it has endured some doubts and questions; perhaps a lot of them. Perhaps a tragedy in your life, a job loss, a serious illness, or the loss of a close friend or loved one created a question or a doubt that chipped away at the foundation of your faith to the point that you've wondered if you can hold on to it. If so, I have what I believe is some very good news for you this morning. Let's read our Scripture text for today, which tells the story of a father who had faith, and yet that faith wavered as his son faced a very difficult situation. Follow along with me as I read Mark 9:14-24 –

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 *“You 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 one who believes.”*

24 *Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”*

Isn't that a fascinating passage? It is especially fascinating because of the declaration of the father who brings his son to Jesus to be healed. The father, understandably, is desperate to find healing for his son. What parent would not be? This is a father willing to go anywhere or do anything in order to find healing for his son. I wonder what their journey was like, as they found their way to Jesus. How far did they have to travel? What was on the father's mind as they traveled? What was it like for him when they arrived to where the disciples were, only to find that Jesus was not there, because he was up on the mountain with Peter, James, and John? Jesus had taken Peter, James, and John up on the mountain where he was transfigured before them. Peter, overwhelmed with the experience, suggested that they build some shelters and stay there for a while. Who wouldn't want to stay there, enjoying a literal mountaintop experience? But just as quickly as that experience had come, it ended, and Jesus was leading them down from the mountaintop and into the chaotic scene below. It is a reminder that as much as we love our mountaintop experiences, we do not get to stay there long, nor should we stay there long. There is far too much work to be done in the valleys below, because that is where people live and where real life takes place. And after all they had been through, when Jesus does arrive on the scene and asks what was going on, the father comes to Jesus and simply asks *if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us*. Personally, I think that father is remarkably restrained at that point. If you're a parent, have you ever grieved over what your child has experienced? Have you lost sleep because of worry, been awake in the middle of the night praying for their health and welfare? Have you ever felt your heart broken, have you ever experienced the sense of helplessness, have you ever had that moment where you were willing to say anything, to do anything, to go anywhere, or to give anything to help your child? If you have kids, of course you have. Or, you will. The father is very polite, as he explains to Jesus what is happening with his son and then simply asks, *if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us*. Is it just me, or would you get down on your hands and knees and beg on behalf of your child? Forget politeness and social graces! Wouldn't you say *I'll do anything! I'll give everything I have! I'll give everything my neighbors have, if you'll just help us!* Even though he is restrained, it is easy to hear the sense of desperation in this father's voice, as well as a measure of hesitancy, as though he is fearful to allow his hopes to rise too far. It would be easy, after so much disappointment, to think, *I dare not believe that any good can come. I cannot allow myself to believe that Jesus can heal my child.* If ever

there is anything that will put a crack of doubt in the foundation of faith it is watching our children suffer, and the helpless feeling that accompanies it.

To me, this father is a template for all of us, as we too, at some point, can make that declaration of *I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief*. One of the lessons I have learned from this passage is that belief and doubt not only can coexist, they often *do* coexist. There is a belief – a very erroneous belief, in my opinion – that if faith entertains any level of questioning or doubt, it is not real faith. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth! Doubt, and its attendant questions, often lives around the edges of our faith and life, and it is that combination of doubt and questions that can push us to deeper and more meaningful levels of faith. Personally, I have found that so many of my questions and doubts weren't related so much to faith itself, but to the "package" of faith I was given – a "package" of particular interpretations and doctrines and viewpoints and opinions I was given and told that those interpretations, doctrines, and viewpoints and opinions were essential to faith. Take any of those away, it was implied – or outright said – and the entire package would come tumbling down. When I began to question or doubt some of that "package," it seemed that it might all come tumbling down, and I feared I might be losing faith, when in reality I learned that I wasn't losing faith as much as I was learning the need for, and importance of, reformulating my faith into something that has been much more healthy and durable. It is not wrong – it's not even unusual – for faith and doubt to exist in the same person. It doesn't need to be seen as a threat, especially when it just might be a wonderful growth opportunity.

Here's an important reality – that doubt that may be nagging at you? Those questions that are tugging at you? That might actually be the process of your shedding a view that not only *is* being discarded; it might *need* to be discarded. There are times when some people mix elements into faith that ought not to be there, and they ought to be discarded. Some people want to mix in with faith the idea that some people ought not to be loved and affirmed and accepted. Some people mix in with faith the idea that some people ought to be subjugated and treated less equally. Those kinds of beliefs certainly ought to be discarded, and don't feel badly about discarding them!

I want to tell you a story that illustrates that truth very well. I told this story early in my ministry here, but many of you haven't heard it, and it is worth repeating. It took place in the early 80s, when I was in seminary. One of my professors was well known for making provocative statements, statements that he used to challenge us and challenge our thinking, trying to get us to think very seriously about our faith, and those statements could really bother people. One day in class he said something particularly provocative and in the first row, on the end to my right, was seated a student who leapt up out of his seat. He was so upset by what he heard that he was in tears, and he shouted out to the professor *why are you trying to destroy my faith?* This was a big class – over 100 students – and in just a moment that classroom became very still and quiet. The only sound was the sobs of this student, who stood at his desk crying. We all sat there wondering where this was headed, and wondered what the professor would say. He stood there for a few moments – which seemed like a really long time – and then he began to slowly make his way over to the student, who continued to stand there crying. When he got to the student he didn't say anything; he simply reached up and put his hand on his shoulder, and gently pushed on his shoulder to have him sit back down. The professor kept his hand on the student's shoulder and sat down on the edge of his desk. In a very gentle, pastoral voice, he looked at the student and said, *son, I'm not trying to destroy your faith; I'm trying to strengthen it. If your faith cannot survive this classroom, it will never survive out there.*

That statement put a lot of things into perspective for all of us in the classroom that day. Seminary was a time that was difficult for me. It was difficult for a lot of reasons. I was always tired, because I was in class or working or studying so much that I got very little sleep. I was always hungry because I had very little money for food. And my faith was constantly challenged, and I didn't like that it was. At times it was very painful. But you know what? It was so good for me. That time of my life challenged me to take apart my faith and look at every little, tiny facet of it, examine it, question it, and then put it

back together, and sometimes I put it back together in a very different fashion. That was a time of life that made me tougher and stronger. My faith grew by leaps and bounds and it grew much, much stronger.

I love our church for many reasons, and one of those reasons is because our church does not tell you what you must believe. Maybe you have no questions. Fine. Great. Maybe you have a lot of questions, questions that really worry you. We will help you with those questions, but we aren't going to condemn you for having questions or for asking those questions. In fact, maybe I should stop in the middle of my messages occasionally and ask if anyone has any questions, except I'm afraid the questions I'll get ask would be ones such as, *are you about finished?* I know that not giving a packaged set of answers is scary and hard for some people, and because that is how we operate as a church I understand that our church will not be for everyone. But I also know that life can be very hard and very difficult and when life gets very hard and very difficult we must have something to hold on to that will carry us through not only those moments but all the hard and all the difficult moments, and the only way to build a foundation to get us through those moments is to build a strong and independent faith, and that comes by asking questions, tough questions, and working to find answers to those questions. And then, we will find that we have a faith that will carry us through to the very end, and when that end comes it will carry us through that end to a new beginning in eternity.

I believe we need something to hold onto in this life. I also believe we need something to hold onto as we pass from this life into the next, which is why as much as I love my friends and my family I believe something further is still needed to carry me through not only the next life but will also bring about a transformation in this life and give me something to hold onto in the darkest, most difficult moments of this life. I have looked down into the chasm of unbelief, and I found it very much lacking. I have read many of the books from that point of view and I have thought long and hard about what I believe, and I continually come to the conclusion that faith is the foundation that I need for my life, and for the next life as well. Yes, I continue to have doubts and questions and there are times when I too say, *I believe, help my unbelief*, but I know that is not an expression of weakness, but of strength. I do not have to have an answer for every question because I know that ultimately, I have the answer that matters most, and that is Jesus.