

**“They Were Not Strong Enough:
Praying with Jesus in our Many Neighbourhoods”**

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A Series on Practicing God’s Presence in the Lord’s Prayer

Mark 9:14-29

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See the Scripture by clicking [here](#).

“*Throwing this kind of spirit out requires prayer.*” That last line drew me to this story, because we’ve been talking about prayer. Then I looked closer . . . “O dear!”

Demon possession? I was tempted to finagle it so to fit our early-21st century ways of thinking. Then something told me that a problem with our early-21st century way of thinking is we assume we have stuff like that all figured out. Maybe we don’t! Maybe there are spiritual things going on that we don’t get, that we’ve lost sight of, that don’t fit nicely. Jesus seems to think so.

But then there is Jesus in this story. He’s prickly! “*You faithless generation! How long will I put up with you?*” That’s not nice-Jesus. His disciples can’t get something done, and he goes off on them like that! I was tempted to soften Jesus’ rough edges. Then something told me that we might need Jesus to get prickly with us from time to time. He might have expectations of us. Jesus seems to think so.

Something told me to just go with the story, including the demonic and prickly parts.

Besides, that last line still stands. When they are debriefing afterwards, the disciples ask, “*Why couldn’t we throw this spirit out?*” Jesus answers, “*It requires prayer.*”

Something tells me that’s really good news!

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They could not get the job done.

Three of the disciples were just coming back from a powerful experience. They’ve been to the mountaintop with Jesus. They’d seen him in the fullness of his glory. They’d heard God the Father celebrating Jesus the Son: *I love him. Listen to him!* Bathed in God’s presence, they wanted to stay up there. Of course! But Jesus led them back down . . . to where demons possess and disciples fail.

Jesus had given his disciples authority over demons. They had driven them out before.¹ They weren’t trying something new or doing something they should not have. The father came with his completely messed-up son. They got to work. Nothing happened! The boy

¹ Mark 6:7,13.

was still a mess. The father, more distressed.

Dad was not the problem. You heard him cry to Jesus: *"I have faith! Help my lack of faith!"* *"I trust! Help my mistrust!"* We are drawn to him. In him we see ourselves. We are mixes of belief and doubt, trust and fear. That dad speaks for us.

The dad was not the problem. Jesus' disciples were.

I picture them madly trying out different magical words. Experimenting with one hand raised, then two. *"Use this scripture. No, that one."* But its not that they had the wrong technique. It was something about their faith, their trust, that left them powerless, and Jesus shaking his head.

And it had something to do with prayer. That's really good news!

III

"They were not strong enough." That's bone-chilling-scary!² Because it is true, about disciples of Jesus, and not just those first ones. *"Not strong enough."*

We come together as Jesus' people in this place, gathering to worship. We are lifted by singing (usually). We are strengthened by praying (often). The minister inspires us (sometimes). He goes on about how what happens here on our little Sunday-morning mountaintop will lead us out into our many neighbourhoods: the places and communities where we will be doing life this week. What God does for us here strengthens us for what will happen out there.

We come down from that mountaintop . . . *"They were not strong enough."*

We are not making the difference we intend to. Things are not changing for the better like we expected. Conflict keeps bubbling up. We get into tussles about the silliest things, with uttermost seriousness. Decisions we make with good hearts and well-thought-out reasons end up wrong and hurtful. Even when we see a success and are celebrating, another crisis is sneaking in with a sinister "Surprise!"

So we try things differently. Adjust this. Tweak that. Form a committee. Set up a task group. Make better policy. Sign a petition. Go to a conference.

And we fizzle out, with the fanfare of an un-knotted-balloon, let go.

"Go make a difference. We can make a difference. Go make a difference in the world."

² Ched Myers, Who Will Roll Away the Stone? Discipleship Queries for First World Christians. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 76.

Sometimes we sing that song.³

I've tried. But some demons! They won't get thrown out.

"They were not strong enough."

IV

Jesus gave them authority to throw out whatever steals God's peace from people and neighbourhoods. He sent them to do this. And they had success!⁴ Imagine, dealing with demons. They must have felt a bit freaked-out, and great!

I don't think I've every thrown out a demon. (Maybe I expect too little of God.) Still, I've got power. I have influence. I have success. Do you have power, influence and success, in big ways and small ways? Ours is a nation of great wealth. A country that beats the odds. A culture that's about progress. A world with knowledge, abilities, resources and confidence. Of course the challenges are huge. But when do we ever admit defeat? *"Can we fix it? Yes we can!"*⁵

But *"they were not strong enough."*

Jesus' first disciples fooled themselves into thinking that the gift Jesus had given them was under their control, that the mission to which Jesus had summoned them was theirs to manage, that they had the ability, they had the power, they had the commitment to get things done.⁶

Jesus called them *"faithless."*

It requires prayer, he insisted.

That's really good news!

V

The Lord's Prayer. We've been "perching" on the Lord's Prayer these weeks. When Jesus' disciples asked him how to pray, he taught them his prayer.

When we pray our Master's Prayer, we are submitting . . .

- we are submitting everything we are doing;
- we are submitting every gift we have and ability we enjoy;

³ "Go, Make a Difference" by Steve Angrisan and Tom Tomaszek (1997). See More Voices (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2007), 209.

⁴ Mark 6:13.

⁵ The catchphrase of "Bob the Builder," a children's television show.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bob_the_Builder

⁶ Fitch, 174.

- we are submitting every desire of our heart and yearning of our spirit;
- we are submitting every challenge we are facing

when we pray with Jesus, we are submitting us and everything to God. That's good news.

Praying Jesus' Prayer, we are giving up control. That's good news.

Praying with Jesus, we are joining what God is doing. That's good news.

We are speaking truth: *We are not strong enough.* We are not made to be strong enough. You don't have to be strong enough. That's good news!

Every place you're in is a place for you to join with Jesus in prayer. Every situation you face is perfect for to join with Jesus in prayer. Nothing is out-of-bounds.

Most of the time, most of the people you'll be with are not followers of Jesus. So it's not about saying, "Everyone come over. Let's pray about this." We are on other people's turf, and we need to respect that.

But that makes prayer even more important. In even the most secular places, Jesus is already there. I'm wondering if Jesus might have placed you there to be with him. So pray with him. . . . "Our Father. . . ." You open up to see God's presence and walk faithfully with God. You give God your worry and anxiety. You give God your confusion and what you don't know. You give God yourself.

Submitted to God, you start seeing what God is up to. And hear God's invitation: join me.

We are not strong enough. It needs prayer!

This is the good news of Jesus. Amen.