

The exorcism of the lunatic son teaches us how to believe, with action, prayer and fasting.

10th Sunday after Pentecost; Matthew 17:14-23

Synopsis: When the disciples asked the Lord why they could not cast out the demon from the lunatic boy, he answered that it was because of their unbelief. But as is always the case, He answered with much more than that fact. He taught us how to have belief. It is through action which is based on our faith, and prayer and fasting.

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The text has been transcribed and edited from the audio.

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit amen. We have a story today that is actually historically more less around this time liturgically, because the Transfiguration was recently celebrated and it is 40 days before the Exultation of the Cross. Historically the Transfiguration was 40 days before the Lord ascended the cross, that is, Good Friday. It was moved to August 6 because we want to have a more festive celebration. It still is in a Lenten period (the Dormition fast) nonetheless, since it is outside of Great Lent, we can be a little more festive with it, but we wanted to keep the connection between the Transfiguration and the cross. If you know the story there's a there's a big connection and that why the church moved it to 40 days before the Exultation of the Cross.

The healing of the demoniac boy happened right after the Transfiguration. The Lord had gone with Peter and James and John and went up into mount Tabor, about a mile high, or a little less. And He transfigured before them, but while that was happening a man had brought his boy to the other disciples. These other disciples had cured people; they had gone out two by two, probably at least twice, and they had had healed the sick. They definitely cast out demons. But this demon they could not cast out.

After Lord came down from the mountain, this man brings him the boy. There's another account by another Evangelist that says something very important. The man says "I believe Lord, help my unbelief", because he wanted to believe, but he couldn't believe that well and I think that applies very much to you and I.

The man brings the boy and he says: "I asked your disciples to cast him out, and they could not". The disciples must not have liked to hear that; it would've been kind of embarrassing for them. The man continued: "And sometimes he throws (my son) into the fire and sometimes into the water". And Jesus answered: "O faithless and perverse generation! How long shall I be with you, how long should I suffer you?" This is a connection with the cross. He is not only saying "you are faithless", but he is also saying in a kind of a dark way, a hidden way, that He is leaving soon because His passion would happen very soon after this. He's really saying: "I'm not going to be with you very long, not in body. But after I ascend, I'm going to leave you my church and my apostles, and send you the Holy Spirit in order to bring you all things that you need, but I won't be walking the earth anymore, and healing your sick. I'll leave that to those whom I have appointed".

After he cast out the demon, the apostles are perplexed, because they had been able to cast out demons before, so they go to him privately. And they say: "why couldn't we do it, why couldn't we cast him out?" And Jesus says: "Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, if ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto

this mountain, remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you. Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting”.

So, what does all this mean?

You know the basic story, but there's a lot of theology in the story. First of all, let's talk about the demon. Demons can inhabit people. It may be because of their sins or sometimes, for reasons we do not understand, God might allow it. When I was in Russia, I saw people that were demon possessed coming up for communion. They would scream beforehand but after they come up for communion, they were calm, so the demon could only torment them intermittently, and could not torment them after they'd have mysteries. This is a very confusing thing, but it is a fact the demons do affect us and I think we are somewhat blind to the spiritual realities of the world.

Definitely the demons want to hurt us. They want to hurt us because we have something they do not have. We have the Image of God within us and we can know Him intimately. They can't. They can't know Him because they rejected Him. They are angry at anyone who can have what they cannot have. They're jealous, and they hate us. They would throw us into the fire - that is - passionate sins: anger, lust, remembering wrongs, seeking revenge, bad thoughts about people - all of those are “hot” sins. The water is indifference, being worldly, lazy, not really focusing much on God, just sort of living your life. As I've said before, this is just be-bopping through life. And we're prone to these sins: these hot sins and these cold ones. The hot sins can kill you and the cold ones too. Unfortunately, we are often subject to both of them.

The Lord answers his disciples' question: the reason they could not cast out the demon is because of their unbelief. That's a very important thing. I've told you before when I read the scriptures, especially, when I read them preparing for a sermon, I just circle things. I have “unbelief” circled and underlined. This is really important. Why couldn't we cast him out: “because of your unbelief”.

You must know what belief is in order to know what unbelief is. What is believing? He explains it but not in so many words. He explains it for those who have ears to hear and eyes to see. First of all, He says to believe is to work, to labor according to the grace of God. He explains this by saying: “if you have faith as the grain of mustard seed, you can say to this mountain remove to this yonder place and it will be removed.” So, if you have faith small like a mustard seed, and that mustard seed grows, then you will have the ability to move mountains. In your faith will become a great tree. You know about the parable of the mustard seed; He's invoking it here: little grain of mustard seed is buried in the ground and it grows into to a great tree. That's work, that's labor.

There is a recent heresy (of course in Orthodoxy, when we say when we say new, we mean within the past few 100 years; we still talk about the new martyrs of the Turkish yoke and that was several hundred years ago). *The relatively new heresy, is the idea you can have salvation without labor.* It's not possible. You must labor. You cannot have belief unless you are laboring. Faith is to believe and also to act upon what you believe.

We must look to ourselves when we have our troubles, when we're depressed, when we are anxious, when we're angry about something, when things are just not going well for us, when our life is out of sorts. It's not our external circumstances that are the problem. It is how we are relating to them. You can go through terrible things, and they are difficult things, there's no doubt about it. But if we have faith, then we go through them in a different

way than the people of the world. We go through them and still labor to live according to the Gospel. This is very important.

So, if you have some trouble with sin, especially habitual sin, shall we say, you have some demon (I am speaking metaphorically here). The demon tried to throw the boy into the fire and the water, and we are subject to sins of fire and water. And those are ingrained sins; some of *them* are very hard to get rid of. If you have those sins ingrained in you then you must have unbelief. You might say: "I believe in God, I believe in the Trinity, I say the creed and I believe every word of it, and I come to church, and I say my communion prayers and come to communion – how can you say I don't have belief?"

Belief is *how you live based upon what you say you believe*. That might be a circular reference, but theologically it's absolutely correct. You believe and you act. If you don't act, you don't really believe. The first thing, if you want to cast out those things from your heart, is to act, to work, to have faith that is active and acts like the mustard seed. When it goes into the ground it doesn't just lay there and die and become moldy; it grows, so we must also.

Also, He says that this kind does not come out *except by prayer and fasting*. This is one of the reasons why we fast. We fast because of our weakness. We don't fast because of any idea that somehow, we can do this or that and God will then say we are worthy. We never are worthy. We fast because it is part of our nature to need fasting in order to have spiritual intelligence, and be wakeful. It's absolutely necessary.

I want to tell your story I just heard about this this week. I was talking to some of my guys in prison and it was a Wednesday. And I didn't have the heart to tell them that it was a fast day. They were having chicken that day. Chicken is one of the few decent meals in prison; it's actually baked chicken, and sometimes they get fried chicken. Most of the time they have a chicken patty that's basically feathers and beaks; I've seen it: it's horrible, it smells bad. I didn't have the heart to tell the guys I was talking to because I figured most of them would have ignored the fast and would've eaten the chicken and I didn't want to heap that sin upon them; they should know better, but sometimes a pastor chooses to not say things.

I talked to another person in prison the next day, still during Dormition fast, and I was talking about how you should do something extraordinary in extraordinary circumstances. If you have faith then you understand this, and you act in an extraordinary way, because of the extraordinary things that happen to you. Having sins is extraordinary, so all of us are in a situation where we need to do things that are extraordinary. We need to go above and beyond what we think we can; we need to fast, we need to pray, we need to forgive our brother, we need a struggle to follow the commandments, because we have a problem and we want to get the problem fixed. He wrote to me later, and said that the day that I left they had baked chicken for dinner. He gave away the chicken to somebody, and got vegetables from them. And he told me and they didn't have cornbread - he would've gotten corn bread also. Cornbread in prison is actually really good - they have this jalapeno cornbread that is really good. He said that he felt this great warmth, and a sort great happiness in him. He'd just given up eating chicken, and treated it like it was not a big deal - but he felt the grace from it because he had done something exceptional.

We need to do things like that. He has troubles - the man's in prison! Anybody in prison has troubles, he is struggling against these troubles by fasting, and forgiving his brother, and turning the other cheek. You've got lots of

opportunities to do that in prison, but then again, you have opportunities to do that in Walmart, or in your own home.

You must fast. It's critically important. Those who don't fast, don't understand it. If you start to fast, then you see that there is a power from fasting. We get stronger from fasting, not weaker; we get stronger, physically and spiritually.

Fasting must be accompanied with prayer. Of course, you know I feel compelled to talk to about prayer in every sermon! The reason I do is because it's so critically important. And we consider breathing to be necessary; nobody would think to not breathe. Prayer is breath. Prayer is to have God in your nostrils, as the scripture talks about, to feel Him.

It's critically important to pray, to fast, to work. And then your unbelief goes away.

It's incumbent on you to do these things. Yes, of course you should say "Oh Lord, I'm weak; I need help with this, I need help with that, I can't do this without Thy help" - of course all those things are true. It's not like you must become perfect in order to become perfect! You're becoming perfect because the Lord will help you. It is not incumbent on you to supply the perfection, God will. God will supply, as you pray, fast, struggle - as you live with faith. And then there will be more belief and less unbelief.

There is an epidemic of people that don't really believe. We have a whole world that hardly believes, they don't know what to believe. They don't know who they are, and they don't know what to believe in. Orthodox Christians don't seem to be immune to these modern ills; they also don't know who they are or what to believe in. Some of the reasons are because your bibles are too dusty and you don't pray enough. It is as simple as that. And, you don't fast well.

So, try improving these things. May God help you to do those things. If you're not doing them, why don't you do them a little bit better this week? On Wednesday we have Dormition of the all holy lady Theotokos. We celebrate her death and then her resurrection bodily by the Lord taking her into the heavens. So, why don't you fast today? Also, fast tomorrow, and on Tuesday fast strictly, and then there is Dormition. It's on the Wednesday, so it is still a fast day but it would be good to eat some really good fish, with a good bottle of wine.

That would be a very good thing! If you're accustomed to fasting, a short little intense fast would be very good. It would help with those things in you that you want to get rid of, the things that are fire and water.

May God bless you and help you in all things.

Priest Seraphim Holland