**Power, Principalities and Prayer**

**Text: Mark 9:23**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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It’s a sure sign that former athletes are getting old and flabby when they stop working out and start telling old stories about their glory days.

Guilty as charged!

So, having confessed, let me tell you another story about running track in high school.

One of our rival schools had a runner named Steve Jackson. Steve was short, he was stocky, he wasn’t all that fast; in fact, he wasn’t built like a runner at all. He was the kind of guy that, you know, when tall, lanky runners like me stepped up to the starting line, we’d look down on him and think, “This dude is going to be eating my dust!” But you only said that the *first* time that you ran against Steve, because once that dude started to run, he wouldn’t stop! Sure, he wasn’t that fast but when you’re running two miles, speed isn’t the most important thing; endurance is. This short, stocky dude would just keep running and running and as a sophomore – as a *sophomore* – he ran *varsity* in the state track meet. Put in a decent showing that year and as a senior, he was the best two miler in the State of Illinois. Steve Jackson had found his passion.

Never underestimate the power of a determined individual or a determined group to accomplish great things. Especially when that group or individual has found their passion; their calling; the thing that God has gifted them to do, and with deep faith they *do* it.

There is great power in faith. There is great power when you believe deeply in the very thing that you hope to accomplish. It’s not your power, it’s not my power, it’s *God’s* power. But a deep seated faith, coupled with the power of prayer, helps us to tap into the mighty power of God. And God’s power can accomplish all things.

We’ve seen this power of faith at work as we’ve journeyed through Mark’s gospel. As we’ve noted in past weeks, Mark’s Jesus is all about confronting the evil powers that seek to thwart God’s Kingdom. And those powers are often presented as the demonic forces that can enter into and control both persons and places. So a frequent scene in Mark’s gospel is Jesus casting out those demons. We see this in the 1st chapter, where Jesus goes all over Galilee…casting out demons. In the 6th chapter he sends out his disciples…to cast out demons. 15 times in this relatively short gospel we see some reference to Jesus or his disciples…casting out demons. And we see it again in today’s gospel lesson. There is a boy who has been seized by some kind of spirit, and it makes him unable to speak, it throws him into fire and water, it seems to have complete control over him. The disciples haven’t been able to cast it out, and the boy’s father has some doubt that Jesus can. So he approaches Jesus and he says, “*If* you are able to do *anything*, please help us.”

At that point, I think Jesus probably let loose a big laugh! And he says in Mark 9:23, “*If* you are able?! *All* things can be done for the one who believes.” There is power in faith.

If we’ve learned anything so far in this series on Mark, we’ve learned that in order to understand what’s going on in a text, we have to examine key words in the Greek language in which Mark wrote. And the key word here is *believes*. Elsewhere we see essentially the same word expressed as *belief* or *faith*. The Greek word is *pistis*, and it has a variety of connotations, but at the core of its meaning is the English word *trust*. We often think of faith as adherence to doctrine, as adherence to *ideas about* God or Jesus, as accepting such ideas to be true. And certainly ideas and doctrine are part of the equation, but they’re not the sum total of the equation; they don’t lie at the *heart* of faith. At the heart of faith, at the heart of belief, is trust: trusting in God; trusting in the presence and the power of God; trusting in one’s self as a *child* of God who has been *equipped* by God to *serve* God. And also, trusting in God’s promise to draw *something* good out of *any* given situation; trusting in God’s promise to bring in the Kingdom of love, of justice of safety, of peace. There is power in such faith.

The opposite of such faith – the opposite of such trust – isn’t doubt, it’s fear. I become afraid when I fail to trust in God’s ability to do great things. And in my fear, I lose access to God’s power.

Faith is trust; and it can also be defined as ultimate concern. The object of my faith is the thing that I’m ultimately concerned about, the thing that I’m passionate about, the thing around which I’m going to organize my life, the thing to which I’m going to *devote* my life. When faith is not just an idea in my head or a nice warm feeling in my heart but is rather something that my whole being is focused on, then all of the energy within me is concentrated on doing things that are associated with the my faith. That’s why there is such power in faith.

Faith – that is to say, trust – is the key to healing in Mark’s gospel. Healing! I mean, talk about power! Faith is the key to casting out demons in Mark’s gospel. What is Jesus’ go-to formula when he heals someone? Yes, that’s it: “Your faith has made you well.” Back in Mark 5, for example, when the woman is healed simply by touching his cloak he says to her, “Your faith has made you well.” Down the road a bit in chapter 10 Jesus will heal the man known as “Blind Bartimaeus,” and he says…say it with me, “Your faith has made you well.” And what he’s really saying is, “Your *trus*t has made you well.” Trusting that something *can* happen helps to make is so. It is through trust that we tap into God’s ability to do great things. Trust empowers *us* – God’s *servants* – to do great things.

By contrast, fear takes away our power. Fear breaks our connection with the mighty power of God. When we give in to our fear it’s like pulling the plug on the coffee maker. Darn thing won’t work if it’s not plugged in. And we can’t fulfill the mission of the Church unless *we’re* plugged in. Fear unplugs us, but faith empowers us. Which is why, in Mark 5, when the leader of the synagogue is about to abandon hope that Jesus can heal his daughter, Jesus says, “Do not fear, only believe.” And, of course, the daughter is healed. In fact, she’s raised from the dead.

Fear disconnects us from God’s power, faith and trust *infuse* us with God’s power. Fear is what has held this congregation back in the past; faith and trust will power us forward. And not just this congregation, but every congregation that I’ve ever served, has been held back by fear. We Christians are so concerned about being nice that we’re *afraid* of offending somrone. So most of the time, when someone comes up with a creative idea that might move the church forward, one or two people object – or sometimes it’s a very small but very dedicated minority of people who object – and God forbid that we might offend those few people by saying, “I’m sorry, we’re going to do this anyway because God has called us to do it.” We are afraid of offending, so we give in to those who are raising objections, and the church goes nowhere, and it withers and dies. Fear disconnects us from God’s power.

Fear holds back congregations; including *this* congregation. My first church had a treasurer who controlled the place. And he did it by intimidation. If he said that something couldn’t be done, then it couldn’t be done. Never mind that fact that the congregation really did have the financial capability to launch new ministries and do great things. Everyone was afraid of him. No one would challenge him. It would have taken just a few strong leaders to say, “No, Phil; we are going to move in a bold new direction; and if you disagree, we’re going to find a new treasurer.” But fear had sapped their power. When we are afraid to confront those who intimidate – those who use intimidation to protect their own *selfish* power – we unplug the church from *God’s* power.

We have known something about such fear and intimidation in this place. I trust that we’ve all learned fear’s painful lesson.

Fear enfeebles us, but trust empowers us. The father of this boy who was possessed by a demon was afraid, but he didn’t let his fear overpower him. He said, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.” He was afraid, but his trust overpowered his fear. And even his admission of fear was a prayer that he might be empowered. “Help my unbelief, Lord, because I *believe* in you, I *trust* you; please heal my fear and heal my son.” That’s what the frightened yet faithful father is really saying; and really praying.

Faith in its essence is trust, and there is great power in such trust. And that power is especially accessed through prayer. The disciples had *tried* to heal the son – they’d tried to cast out the demon that was controlling him – but they couldn’t, because they’d forgotten to pray. When they asked Jesus why *he* could cast out this particular demon he said, “This kind can come out only through prayer.” And he might’ve added, “And you, my friends, can’t be bothered to wake up early with me to pray, or if you do try to pray with me, you fall asleep.” Mark’s Jesus is frequently in prayer, but he’s always praying by himself because the disciples can’t get it together to pray with him.

The power of God is accessed through prayer. So I’m encouraged that several people have said to me, “Pastor, this church needs a prayer group.” And I’m encouraged that those who feel a call to this ministry have agreed to be form such a group. And I’m encouraged as well by the knowledge that as we move through this year of Telling Our Story and discerning the Future Glory into which God is calling us, folks who’ve heard a call to prayer will be helping to power us through that process; just as those who’ve heard a call to discern will see the vision that God has placed before us, and those who’ve heard a call to tell stories will remind us of when we’ve been at our faithful best in the past, and those who’ve heard a call to generosity will provide us with the resources that we need to move forward, and those who’ve heard a call to be helpers will be busy behind the scenes getting things done, and those who’ve heard a call to manage will steer us forward as we pursue our vision.

Whether it’s prayer or discerning or story telling or giving or helping or managing, it’s all about finding your passion, and finding God’s power in your passion, so that we can do together what God had called us collectively to do. You see, a well-organized and impassioned group can accomplish great things; because they’ve tapped into great power, and they believe in their cause. Mark’s gospel emphasizes the power of faith, the power of prayer, and the power of the crowd. When the crowd is filled with doubt and fear, Jesus can do very little. When the crowd is filled with faith – even a *little* faith – Jesus can do *great* things. The crowd in Mark 9 believes in Jesus. They argue with the scribes because the scribes oppose Jesus; and they run forward – filled with awe – to greet Jesus. They believe in Jesus; they trust Jesus. Well organized and passionate groups, with a deep faith in the righteousness of their cause, can change churches, and communities, and nations, and the world. When you’ve prayed about it, and you’re passionate about it, and you’ve organized around it, no one will be able to stop it. Delay it maybe, but they won’t *ultimately* stop it; unless you let them, through fear. The powers and principalities of this present age know well how to manipulate us through intimidation and fear but be of good courage: God has already defeated the powers and principalities. All things are possible for the one who believes in the power and the promises of Jesus Christ our Lord.

The power of the demonic is real. We see it in a young man who walks into a high school with an assault rifle. We see it in the divisions in our nation, and in those who encourage those divisions. We see it in the addiction and the despair that grip far too many people in Lawrence County. The power of the demonic is real but fear not, dear church; be not afraid: for our prayer and our passion are connecting us to the power and the possibilities of Jesus Christ. We can accomplish *great* things when we trust him, when we follow him, when we allow him to live and move at the center of our being. Amen.