

And Jesus asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. And it has often cast him into fire & into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us & help us.”

IF YOU CAN

The golfer sliced his tee shot into the woods. The next several tries he managed to hit into a tree. Eventually he got his shot out across the fairway but into the woods on the other side. Finally, after hammering his way out of those trees, he proceeded to hit into a sand trap.

He’d noticed that all the while, the club professional had been watching, so he dared to ask him, “What club should I use now?” “I don’t know,” the pro replied. “I’m still trying to figure out what game you’re playing?” **PAUSE**

If you’ve played the game of golf you realize it’s a great one for creating doubt in your mind. There are so many things that can go wrong because golf course designers actually work at creating problems for you. That’s why the sand pits are referred to as traps – they’re purposely meant to trap you in them, or at least the golf ball you’re trying to hit.

Today’s sermon text also deals with doubt, & whether or not you play golf, each & every one of us has experienced the uncertainty of doubt. As the father of the demon possessed boy said to Jesus, “But if you can do anything...” the three words ‘if you can’ reveal a lack of certainty in the mind of this father. Like you & I, he knows too well the struggle of doubt.

One of the things sporting events do well is providing opportunities for us to face that internal battle. It’s a struggle that pits our mind against itself, rather than against some external enemy. The ability of a player to wage that battle is especially key at the professional level, since everyone there is already an exceptional athlete.

The greatest players have learned how to win that battle against their own self-doubts, &

that's related to 'trash-talking,' where players on the opposing team are trying to 'get into your head' in order to stir up, or strengthen, the self-doubts which are located there. Proverbs 25:28 gives the reason for trash-talking, "A man without self-control is like a city broken into & left without walls." Such a player is left defenseless, & will be easily defeated.

Satan is an expert at trash-talking, but he's not playing basketball or golf. He's playing for everlasting eternity, & He loves to attack when you are defenseless. The fruit of the Holy Spirit called self-control is about managing our self-doubts.

In sports, a key to winning the battle then is learning to recognize the doubts that are living in your mind. Many players aren't consciously aware of them, so they fail & have no clue why. The teachers, that we'll be installing shortly after the sermon, deal with that in the classroom. Because of doubt some students believe they can't learn math, or English, or history.

Students that aren't learning commonly have allowed those doubts, about their ability, to block the gateway of knowledge to their mind. Self-control is about learning to unblock those gates, whether the doubts concern your ability to serve the ball in tennis, or whether those doubts are about your ability to drive the golf ball onto the green.

What questions of self-doubt are plaguing your mind? What is it you fear most in life? Students may fear math or science. Athletes may fear trying to catch the pass with the game on the line. Employers may fear having to keep the business afloat during a recession. Employees may be plagued by self-doubts regarding their ability to perform their jobs adequately.

Is there an answer that is common to all of our fears? That's what the Gospel reading is meant to address: "And Jesus asked his father, 'How long has this been happening to him?' And he said, 'From childhood. And it has often cast him into fire & into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us & help us.'" After struggling with this battle

against his demon possessed son for most of the child's life, the father is clueless about where to turn. The case was extremely severe. It seems the son had almost died on numerous occasions. And now, you can just hear the Jewish scribes arguing their point, "Yeah, Jesus, let's see you cast out this demon. Your disciples couldn't do it."

That's not all that different from, "Just try & teach this student how to sit still & read!" It's not far off from, "How are you ever going to pay off those student loads that got you through college?" People battle against addictions to drugs, & alcohol. They battle against addictions to work & thrill seeking. The doubts are everywhere. Jesus, "If you can do anything...?"

Does Jesus simply cure the child & send the father on his way? No! Jesus uses the circumstances & the father's plea as an opportunity for teaching: "And Jesus said to him, 'If you can!'" Thus, Jesus 1st points out the weakness of the father pleading his son's case. That's not always a comfortable thing to do. People don't always receive that message gracefully.

So, there was an unexpected knock on the door, & like she's always does she 1st looked through the peephole & asked, "Who's there?" "Parcel post, ma'am. I have a package that needs a signature." "Where's the package?" the woman asked suspiciously. The deliveryman held it up. Still not convinced, she said, "Could I see some ID?"

At this point, the deliveryman replied wearily, "Lady, if I wanted to break into your house, I'd probably just use these," as he pulled out the keys she had left in the door.

The woman was doubtful concerning the deliveryman's intentions, & because she persisted in her doubts, in order to get the delivery accomplished, the parcel post guy decided to point out her failure. Maybe she didn't even realize that her doubts were preventing her from receiving the package.

It's common that we don't realize how our doubts are preventing us from receiving the

blessings our Father in heaven intends for you & me. When the keys the woman had left in the door were shown to her, her eyes were opened to her failure to provide protection for herself. When Jesus replied to the father, “If you can!” Jesus was pointing out the father’s failure to receive the blessing his Father in heaven intended for him & his demon possessed son.

Doubt is our greatest enemy because it’s the twin brother of unbelief. The answer to the man’s doubt, Jesus says, is “All things are possible for one who believes.” Jesus is telling him to practice self-control in the battle against his doubts & his fears. Jesus demands that the father of this demon possessed son have faith in Jesus’ ability to heal.

At that moment the father cries out, “I believe; help my unbelief!” This Gospel reading from Mark is a classic expression of the battle going on constantly in the hearts & the minds of all Christians. “Lord, we believe; help our unbelief.” We, even as children of God, are, in this life, still saint and sinner.

Not a one of us should ever become overconfident in our ability to believe, yet we will. Overconfidence is the nature of a sinner. Whether we recognize it not, all of us want to provide for ourselves. We don’t want God’s help. It took the father of the demon possessed boy years of suffering, before he finally turned to Jesus & believed.

Should we expect our pride to be any different? Should we expect our doubts to be any less strong? We struggle with sin, & we also are resistant to confessing or “seeing” our own failures. In ignorance we fail to recognize our need to be independent, & to provide for ourselves without help from our heavenly Father.

Jesus expressed indignation over the faithless & warped & perverse generation, yet He’s willing to labor on, ordering the boy to be brought to Him for healing. When we are not the victims of doubt, but others are, it’s not for us to give up with them. We are to carry on with

faith, not in human beings, but faith in the almighty Son of God, our Lord & Savior. In the battle for everlasting eternity, the key is not reliance upon ourselves but upon Christ. He has already won the victory. Satan is defeated no matter how much trash-talking he does. God gave us a spirit not of fear, or doubt, but of power & love & self-control.

As the Apostle Paul wrote: “Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.” It is not the size or strength of our faith that empowers our works, but the size of our God, our almighty, everlasting God.

Do you remember last week’s message, “What does it take to be strong?” It takes giving things over to God. It takes giving the things of this world, no matter how enamored we are with them, over to God so He could replace them with everlasting treasure, that moth & rust will never destroy.

“If you can do anything, help us! Have compassion on us.” Jesus replied, “Everything is possible for the one who believes.” That causes the father to recognize, to “see” his weakness of faith, to confess it, & then to ask that his son would be healed anyway. The father saw the weakness of his faith, but hoped in the strength of Jesus.

In light of the resurrection it should be clear that Jesus is able, but He doesn’t walk among us now, telling us which side of the boat to fish on. Will He wield His authority according to my wishes? The temptation is for me to doubt. I see few dramatic demonstrations of God’s power. Sin is rampant everywhere, & it’s in the news daily.

We hear of the effects of sin in our families & friends & church members’ lives. We fight with sinful urges within our own hearts all day long. Yet Jesus has the authority to forgive you, & He has. You were given that promise in your Baptism, & continue to receive it at the Lord’s Supper. Your sin cannot separate you from God. Only you can separate you from Him.

As regards eternal life Jesus has done away with your weaknesses, your troubles, your sorrows. In God's sight, in reality, they have only a short season to live. Our trials do not reign over us unless we give them that power. Jesus wants to rule our hearts with peace & joy coming from His mercy & forgiveness. Let not your hearts be troubled. Neither let them be afraid.

Our prayer today: "Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief." Amen.

I know my faith is founded on Jesus Christ, my God & Lord; & this my faith confessing, unmoved I stand on His sure Word. Our reason cannot fathom the truth of God profound; who trusts in human wisdom relies on shifting ground. God's Word is all sufficient, it makes divinely sure; & trusting in its wisdom, my faith shall rest secure.

Increase my faith, dear Savior, for Satan seeks by night & day to rob me of this treasure & take my hope of bliss away. But Lord, with You beside me, I shall be undismayed; & led by Your good Spirit, I shall be unafraid. Abide with me, O Savior, a firmer faith bestow; then I shall bid defiance to every evil foe. Amen.