

January 27, 1974
Mark 9:14-27
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WHEN FAITH FALTERS

I have thought about the subject of this sermon for a long time. There have come to my attention over the years many situations in which men and women have been in such a complicated and frustrating predicament there seemed absolutely nothing that could be done which could extricate them. Becoming aware of their dilemma, their quandary, their crisis, and finding so little I could do to help, I have often found myself asking, "What can one do when there is nothing to be done?"

I posed this question the other day to a group of men with whom I meet regularly--all members of this congregation. I was gratified to hear their answer to the effect that there is never any situation so bad, so hopeless, that there is nothing one can do, for one can always pray. I cannot guarantee that these men always practice prayer under those circumstances, but I was happy that they felt that way about it. And they are, of course, absolutely right. No situation is ever so bad that nothing can be done. If nothing else one can face the situation with calmness and courage and demonstrate to others how it is to be faced triumphantly.

Dr. Victor Frankl tells of a situation in which I hope you and I never find ourselves. He is a well known psychiatrist who believes that the cause of most of our psychogenic illness is due to a lack of meaning in life. He gave an address sometime ago to the men of San Quentin Prison. Afterwards he was told that the men on death row were not permitted to come to the lecture and there was one man there who was about to be executed. Would Dr. Frankl speak to this man on the telephone. What do you say in a situation like that? What message would you have for a man about to die? What would you share with him about the meaning of life? It is indeed an extreme case, but it well illustrates the importance of the question, "What does one do when there is nothing to be done?" In a few weeks I will refer again to Dr. Frankl and tell you what it was he said to that doomed man.

Jesus faced the same question. A father brought to the disciples an epileptic son. The disciples could not cure him. The father, full of love and compassion and concern for his boy, turned to Jesus. Jesus told him that there is always something that can be done: "Everything is possible to him who has faith." Then the father offered a heart-rending plea; "I have faith: help me where faith falls short."

II

Faith seems to be falling short all over the world today. Everywhere one looks there is a mood of pessimism and despair. It is what Gerald Heard called a "failure of nerve", and what we are calling this

morning a faltering of our faith. Many of you will recall the definition of faith which I have tried to hammer into your consciousness for so long: "Faith is the choice of the most reasonable hypothesis." But you see, today men are at the point where they cannot believe that any hypothesis is reasonable. In desperation they try anything and everything--fetishes, black magic, witchcraft, drugs, hypnosis, transcendental meditation, yoga, transactional analysis--you name it and men and women are trying it. They are trying everything--everything except possibly what Jesus said was the one thing necessary.

And what is that? After Jesus had healed the epileptic boy his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we cure this boy?" Jesus replied, "There is no means of effecting this kind of cure. . . but by prayer." When everything else fails, when faith falters, then the only thing that is left is prayer. But thanks be to God it is at the same time the finest and the best thing.

There are so many today whose faith has faltered. Not only has their faith failed them as they have tried to apply it to their personal problems, which would be bad enough, but it has failed them as they have tried to assess the times in which they live. We hear from many who say that our society is about to collapse, that western civilization is finished, that the United States cannot endure more than the 200 years which are now about up. It is at precisely this time of crisis that we cannot let our faith falter. That would be to assure collapse, failure, disintegration. Now more than ever we need to renew our faith, strengthen our resolve, reassert our values and ideals. Especially are we Christians called upon to do that. We Christians can save the world. I strongly doubt that anything else can.

III

Now you will ask and rightly so, "What can I do?" Are you sure you want to know, or would you rather not know so that you can go on lamenting and have an excuse for doing nothing? We shall assume that you really do want to know.

In "The Mad Woman of Chaillot", Jean Giraudoux has a Countess involved in a plot to lead a gang of oil speculators and prospectors into the sewers of Paris and she needs help. Her young associate, Pierre, says, "Is there anything I can do, Countess?"

The Countess does not permit it to be an idle question. She answers, "There is a great deal you can do... You can untwist the cord on the blind and let in a little sunshine for a change. You can take the mirror off the wardrobe door... You can let the mouse out of the trap... Each man to his post."

The reason so many of us complain that there is nothing we can do is that what we can do seems so small and insignificant. We cannot believe that little things make a difference. But we ought to turn the matter around. Instead of asking, "Will the good end I desire be accomplished if I do this little thing?", let us ask, "If I don't do this little thing, will the good end I desire be possible?" The answer is frequently that without this little thing, the big thing cannot be done. Each man to his post!

Where is the post of Christians in times such as these? Certainly one is at prayer. For it is prayer that will build a closer relationship to God, the source of our strength. It is prayer that will enlighten and inspire our minds and hearts. It is prayer that will reinforce our faith so that it will not falter and fail. "There is no means of healing this trouble but by prayer," said Jesus. Pray, and then do all the little things that seem unimportant in and of themselves, but without which the job will never get done. And it is in the very process of doing these little things that our faith can become stronger and more meaningful. Never say, "There is nothing I can do." There is always something you can do even when it seems as if there is nothing that can be done.

John Milton insisted that "They also serve who only stand and wait." But there are different kinds and qualities of waiting. There is the waiting that is nothing more than idleness, wringing the hands, lamenting the situation. There can also be a constructive waiting. There is a time when one says, "I have done all the outward things I can do. Now I must wait, and pray, and hope." That kind of waiting is not wasteful idleness.

When Jesus withdrew from men to be alone he was not wasting time. When he called his disciples into an Upper Room in Jerusalem and supped with them he was not doing nothing. When at the outset of his ministry he went into the wilderness for 40 days and nights he was not engaged in idle self-reflection. That was when he was building and reinforcing the faith which later enabled him to do all those other things which we so marvel at today.

IV

One more matter must be mentioned. It is not very difficult for most of us to have a strong faith when life is bright and cheerful and extremely good to us. In such times we will feel our faith to be strong or we will feel no great need for faith at all.

But then all of our dreams can suddenly be smashed and the light and beauty of life be precipitously snatched from us. That's when we call upon faith. That's when we need faith. That is often when we find that faith falters.

If that has happened to you be assured that it is an almost universal human experience. There is evidence that it even happened to Jesus. None of us ever seem to have an over-abundance of faith. By its very nature faith is not overwhelming assurance. It is indeed a hypothesis, something that is to be tested in the fires of experience. Just because we have faith does not mean that our faith is valid. We may have faith in something less than the best. We may have an inadequate faith, or even an erroneous one. That is why we must constantly be at the job of examining our faith and seeking to make it the best faith possible. That is why all of life must become a life of prayer. We never attain the goal. We aspire and we struggle. Only at the end is our faith made perfect and our life made whole.

What can one do when there is nothing to be done? Go on working, and waiting, and praying, and have faith that with God all things are possible.