

The Second Sunday in Apostles' Tide, July 7, 2024

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

Jesus and Unbelief

Mark 6:1–13

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

Jesus marveled because of their unbelief. And He went about among the villages teaching (v 6).

What do we do with unbelief?

For the unbelief in our own hearts, we find a model in Mark 9. A man whose child has an unclean spirit responds to Jesus with the beautiful little prayer, **“I believe; help my unbelief!”** (Mk 9:24). What an honest confession of his struggle! What a precious plea for help! Whenever doubts gnaw at you, simply pray like him, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!”

But what about the unbelief we see all around us? Your brother was raised in the faith, but then he walked away from it and even mocks Christian beliefs. You’ve prayed daily for your niece, your goddaughter, yet she now calls herself an atheist. Your dearest friend declines every invitation to church and avoids conversations about spiritual matters. A wider lens reveals even more of a wasteland: Online groups where people actively “deconstruct” their faith and teach others to do the same. Or the apostasy of Christian “celebrities,” like former evangelical Pastor Joshua Harris. In 1997 he authored a book on courtship called *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* but twenty years later renounced his book and then kissed his wife, ministry, and faith goodbye.

What do we do with such unbelief? It might make us angry: “Why can’t they just see it my way!” It might make us frustrated: “I just wish they could see what I see.” It might make us sad, as we think, “Unless someone can get through to them, they’ll spend an eternity apart from God.”

You should know that unbelief isn’t new. It isn’t unique to our time. It isn’t limited to your family and friends. Jesus Himself—yes, even Jesus!—experienced the same thing. When He returned to His hometown and began teaching in the synagogue, they didn’t welcome what He had to say. “Why, isn’t this little Jesus? Just who does He think He is?”

Where did He get these things? What’s this wisdom given to Him? How are such mighty works done by His hands? Isn’t this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And aren’t His sisters here with us?” And they took offense at Him (vv 2–3). And it wasn’t just His old neighbors who responded this way. The unbelief was present even **among His relatives and in His own household** (v 4).

How did Jesus respond? What did He do with their unbelief? **Jesus marveled because of their unbelief** (v 6).

People were astonished at Jesus’ teachings. But still, they didn’t believe. And Jesus marveled because of their unbelief. Some who barely knew Him went to great lengths to seek Him out. The paralytic’s friends literally removed the roof to let him down near Jesus. Jairus fell at His feet to plead for His daughter’s life. All the woman with the flow of blood wanted to do was to touch the hem of His garment. And yet back in Nazareth, He knew them, and they knew Him. That should’ve meant something. But still, they didn’t believe. And Jesus marveled because of their unbelief. With nothing more than a compassionate touch, Jesus laid His hands on individual after individual . . . and they were healed! Every one of them! But still, they didn’t believe. And Jesus marveled because of their unbelief. They rejected His teaching. They rejected His healings. They rejected His offer. They rejected His kingdom. They rejected His mission. They rejected His authority. They rejected . . . Him. You can see the shadow of the cross in that rejection.

Their unbelief was so unbelievable that Jesus “marveled” at it. Think about that. As the Son of God, Jesus had quite literally “seen it all.” He’d seen the fall of mankind, the murder of Abel, the grumbling in the wilderness, the worship of the golden calf, the lust of David, the stubborn rebellion of Israel and Judah, the burning of Jerusalem by the hand of the Babylonians. He saw it all. Nothing could surprise Him. Nothing could be worse than what He’d already seen throughout all of human history. Yet here, in His hometown, the people who knew Him best rejected Him to His face. And what else could He do? Jesus marveled because of their unbelief.

Nevertheless, Jesus kept on. **He went about among the villages teaching** (v 6). “Went about” doesn’t mean that He did it once or twice. It refers to an ongoing, habitual, continued, repeated action. He kept on teaching. He kept on.

In other words, Jesus persisted. He didn’t give up. Even in the face of outright rejection, He kept on. They refused to hear what He had to say. Nevertheless, He kept on

teaching. They heard but didn't believe. Nevertheless, He kept on teaching. They could not and would not understand. Nevertheless, He kept on teaching.

Here's the greatest teacher of all time . . . and He can't get through to them! If Jesus, face to face, in the flesh, cannot convince them, you'd think that it's a lost cause. If ever there were a group of people to write off as hopeless, it would've been them. Nevertheless, Jesus didn't give up. He kept on teaching.

Whatever the obstacle, whatever the response, whatever the lack of faith, whatever the personal rejection . . . Jesus kept on.

In this, we see the character of our God. He doesn't give up easily. He doesn't lose heart. He is patient. He is persistent. He keeps on going. There's an echo of this near the end of Psalm 23: "**Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me**" (v 6). The word follow means to run after or pursue. So we could say, "Surely goodness and mercy shall pursue me." God's goodness is persistent. God pursues us in loving mercy. This is the heart and character of Jesus. Whatever the obstacle, nevertheless! He kept on.

He kept right on through the region of Galilee. Then He headed towards Jerusalem and the cross. While on the way, Jesus taught the disciples about His upcoming rejection. Why did Jesus head to the cross? For the sake of those who have and will reject Him. He was willing even to die for them.

Nevertheless, Jesus kept on. That's where we see the love of God. Jesus was willingly rejected for the sake of those who rejected Him. He doesn't return hate for hate. He prays for His enemies. He blesses those who persecute Him. While we were still weak, while we were still unbelieving, while we were still hostile . . . Jesus gave His life to save us! He didn't wait for us to be worthy. He didn't wait for us to want it. He kept on because it was God's will and His delight.

Jesus marveled because of their unbelief. And, nevertheless, He went about among the villages teaching.

We don't know how people will respond to Jesus, but don't be surprised by rejection. It happened to Him. It happened to the disciples. It will happen to us. You can be ready for that reaction, too. Take heart! Persevere! Keep on! Whether they hear or refuse to hear, they will know that Jesus came for them and died for them.

Take care, however, that what we speak is the good news of God's grace in Jesus. If what they're rejecting isn't actually Jesus but our demeanor, our aggressiveness, our

lack of tact, or our lack of love, that is our moment not to leave in a huff but to repent. And in repentance, we will once again find a patient and gracious Savior who keeps on teaching and providing His perfect grace, even for us.

Here we are. The Holy Spirit has worked faith in us. So there's hope for others, too. What astonishes me most of all isn't the unbelief of others, but the graciousness of our Savior, His keeping on and going the way of the cross for my salvation, and His steadfast love and mercy new for me this morning. That, dear friends, is the greatest marvel of all—and the great marvel that we invite other beloved sinners to receive with us from Jesus.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7
