

Help My Unbelief **Ephesians 2:8-10; Mark 9:14-27**  
 Saint Marks United Methodist Church, Charleston, WV  
 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (August 31) 2014

Ephesians 2:8-10

<sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Mark 9:14-27

<sup>14</sup> And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. <sup>15</sup> And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him. <sup>16</sup> And he asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" <sup>17</sup> And someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. <sup>18</sup> And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able." <sup>19</sup> And he answered them, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me." <sup>20</sup> And they brought the boy to him. And when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. <sup>21</sup> And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. <sup>22</sup> And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." <sup>23</sup> And Jesus said to him, "If you can! All things are possible for one who believes." <sup>24</sup> Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "**I believe; help my unbelief!**" <sup>25</sup> And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." <sup>26</sup> And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." <sup>27</sup> But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.

We continue today in our summer topical sermon series on. Today is "**How do you deal with loss of faith.**" It is a topic that arises with some frequency in the life of the Church –

- people who go through tragedy and feel like their faith is shattered or withered;
- people who are worried about the children who are going through a stage of quite normal exploration but not one that the parent remembers in their own life; and
- people who gradually (or suddenly, as the case may be) experience guilt, fear, or anger because the faith they thought they had, they now think has disappeared.)

For such a critical topic, therefore, a story must be told:

ONCE UPON A TIME, Alf decided to take up a new hobby. He used to run, until his knees failed him. Then he had taken up bicycling, but it seemed like he didn't

take/make the time to do it as regularly as before. And the extra pounds put on since running did not seem to dissolve with the cycling.

So – in a pretty low impact, easy to undertake venture – he joined in the hobby to which one of his friends introduced him: *geocaching*.

Simply put, it was a higher tech version of the old “hide and seek” game of his childhood. He was amazed by how many people were involved. The game is played like this: People put little trinkets into small containers and hide them. Then they mark the location of the hiding spot, by way of a GPS, and register the location in a geocaching cloud in the sky (the internet). Geocachers visit the cloud with their smart phones, pick a treasure to find in the geographical area they want to explore, and then follow the directions of the GPS (or the smartphone app) to find the particular cache with the trinket inside. Find it, open the small cache container, write your name and time of discovery on the paper log inside, re-hide it, and then register your find in the big geocache logbook in the cloud.

It’s gotten quite popular. There are over 6 million geocachers in the world looking for about 2-1/2 million geocaches.

One day, Alf did not have much time, so he picked a treasure, which he thought would be close to his home. As it turned out, it was in a vacant field just down at the end of his street. It was a place that he drove by almost every single day, on his way to work, grocery shopping, church, or almost anywhere.

On his way across the field to find the geocache, and register his find, the toe of his shoe caught on something sticking out of the ground. Since it was enough of a “grab” to make him lose his balance and almost fall, Alf stopped to see what it was that caught his shoe. It was small, but definitely not organic, something human made sticking just out of the ground. He got down on his knees and began to dig at it with his fingers. Finally, using a small stick, he dug it out.

It was not the geocache. He had not yet arrived at that location. Geocache contents are essentially trinket; nothing of any great value. What he discovered here was a small metal object that seemed to sparkle in the afternoon sun. Alf put it in his pocket, and looked at his watch. He had taken longer digging the unplanned find than he realized. He needed to get home in order to stay on schedule for the rest of the day.

A couple of days later, Alf's curiosity got the better of him and he took the little gold object (which he had washed off the evening of its find) into a jewelry store. He was really amazed. That little object had a value of multiple thousands of dollars. He was delighted.

A couple of days later Alf decided to go back to the field to find the original geocache he had sought. He got farther into the field from where he found the gold object, and his now careful eyes noticed another protrusion sticking out of the ground. He stopped, dropped, and dug. He found what looked to be a twin to the gold treasure of the several days ago. This one, was smaller, however, and was only worth a couple thousand dollars.

Alf repeated the exercise three more times over the next ten days. Each time he hit pay dirt. That is when he decided that he had found his new retirement fund. He did the research in the county tax records, found the owner of the field, negotiated with him, and cashed in a big chunk of his pension fund to buy the property. He knew now that his life was secure.

Once he bought the property, Alf did not go exploring very much. It was like money in the bank. He just smiled each day as he drove by it. A couple of times he thought: *"What if some other geocacher goes looking for the same trinket and steals some of my treasure?"* That weekend he dug up the geocache trinket and took it off the register in the cloud. But, he always kept an eye out for trespassers who might steal his treasure.

Now that he had his treasure secure, Alf did not go into the field so much. He actually spent much of his free time cruising on the brand new Honda 600 cc Silver Wing

motor scooter, with all the bells and whistles, that he bought with his *earnings* from the first gold finds. (He called them “*earnings*” but truth be told, they were gifts, since he didn’t do anything to earn them, other than dig them up.)

The field was overgrown, from lack of attention, but Alf figured that would just better disguise the value of it. He had his security, and all he had to do was enjoy it when he needed it.

It was almost three years later, when the need arose. Alf’s son had gone out on his prized Silver Wing and had a bad accident. The medical bills were piling up and Alf needed some quick cash. So he put on his geocaching clothes and went down the street to his own field to dig up some of his own treasure.

He went to the geocache register in the cloud to find the location toward which he should walk, but discovered -- or remembered -- that he had removed that locator, to prevent others from trespassing. He looked for landmarks in the field, but it was so overgrown that he didn’t recognize anything. So he just began wandering by what he called “dead reckoning,” but only found himself “dead confused” and “dead lost.” As the hours turned into days, Alf couldn’t find anywhere that looked like the previous finds. And he certainly didn’t find any more gold. This was a five-acre parcel of land. He began to *panic*.

The longer he looked – he had now taken a week’s vacation to facilitate his treasure hunt – the more *frustrated* he got. Then he got *angry*. He cursed and called out to the God, he went to church on some Sundays to worship, “*Hey! How about a little help here. I promise I’ll give you 10% of what I find, even though it’s already mine.*”

Then, *panic* and *frustration* and *anger* and *unanswered prayer* began to turn into *guilt*: “**If only I had cut the field; if only I had made a map: if only, only, only ...**”

By the end of the fourth day of fruitless labor, Alf dropped to his knees, as the sun was beginning to kiss the horizon. He felt weary. He felt moisture leaking from his eyes mingling with the sweat that had descended from his brow. He didn’t know what to do.

Then, he heard a noise; it sounded like small singing. He turned in the direction of the sound, and saw a little girl come walking, not skipping, through the field.

“Hi, mister. Whatcha doing?”

“Nothing, sweetie, what are you doing?”

“Oh, nothing much. I saw some twinkling in the field, and I came over to see what it was. It was just some old dirty metal sticking up.”

“Where was that, honey?”

“Just over here. Want me to show you?”

Wiping his eyes, Alf got to his feet and put his dirty hand into the little girl’s small hand and followed her to a place about 20 yards from where he had been kneeling.

One of the biggest mistakes we make in the life of the church is to believe that FAITH is something that we have to GET. But it is very clear, from the passage from Ephesians that was our *Call To Worship*. This short passage from Ephesians 2:8-10 was what Wesley scholar Albert Outler called John Wesley’s favorite piece of scripture in the whole Bible:

**For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,<sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast.**

And, if the GIFT quality prevents it from being something over which we may boast, it also OUGHT to prevent us from feeling GUILT.

So often, it seems to me, that preaching and teaching is directed along the lines of: **BY GOD! YOU NEED FAITH IN ORDER TO BE SAVED. IF YOU DON’T HAVE IT, THEN YOU BETTER GET IT. SHAME ON YOU! DO IT NOW.**

**It’s a gift.**

All we can do is discover it. And then treasure it.

There will often be times in life when it seems to be not enough. Just ask Mother Teresa. But that doesn't mean it's gone. Ephesians 2:8-10 may have been John Wesley's favorite scripture, but I have found a great number of people who have claimed Mark 9:24 as THEIR favorite:

**“I believe; help my unbelief!”**

- It's a confession of having received the gift before;
- a confession of not having held onto it; and
- a confession of reliance upon God to restore the gift.

In the Gospel story that the evangelist Saint Mark remembers about Jesus, the father's confession: **“I believe; help my unbelief!”** was enough.

In the story told about Alf, God came (as so often happens in stories) in the form of a small child, to restore the gift.

In YOUR STORY, remember: it's a GIFT. Hold onto what you have.

- **DEPEND** upon God to give and restore what you need.
- **DEPEND** on God for this.
- **DEPEND**.
- That **DEPENDENCE** is the *essence of faith* itself.

**“Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!”**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.