

SERMON FOR SUN. SEPT. 12, 2021

Pent 16B 2021 Mark 9:14-29 “Many Variables, One Constant”

Dear fellow redeemed of, by and for Christ, do you remember algebra? The mere mention of the word sends shivers down the spines of many people.

But what makes algebra so tough? Because with algebra, math isn't quite so concrete anymore. You begin working with *variables*. The equations no longer have just numbers, but x's, y's, and z's. And the more variables, the more complex the problem becomes

But algebra problems *can* be figured out because, with the variables there are also *constants* - numbers or values that are definite. And it's the constants that enable problems to be solved.

But even if you don't remember much about algebra - or never took it – you're aware that variables and constants aren't just the things of math, but the stuff of life.

In your life, there are *variables* - things that aren't certain, but are undependable; but there are also *constants* - things that don't change and that you can rely on.

And like algebra problems, life problems get harder when the variables increase - when there are too many uncertain, changing things in your life, then you don't know what to do.

And that's where the father in the Holy Gospel today was at - he didn't know what to do. His son had an unclean spirit.

Since childhood it had tormented him greatly and placed him in spiritual and physical danger.

The father had undoubtedly done all he could think of to help his son, but nothing worked.

And then, with great hope, he had asked Jesus' disciples to help him and cast out this spirit, but they failed.

And now, as Jesus, James, John and Peter descended from the mount of Transfiguration, they are confronted with a great argument going on, between the Jewish scribes, the disciples, and the crowd that had gathered.

This father was at the end of his rope and on very shaky ground. But what could he count on? His faith? He tried, but his faith was strong one day and weak the next; one day full of hope and the next day filled with fear. Just like you and me.

No, his faith was not a constant he could count on. In fact it was so shaky, he asked Jesus to help his unbelief.

Neither could he count on his friends - they were using the occasion to argue while his son continued to be tormented.

And his good works? What good were they? He couldn't even do good for who mattered most to him, his own son.

His life was filled with confusion, uncertainty, and failure. What would the unclean spirit do next? There were so many variables and, well, were there *any* constants he could rely on?

Today is the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. It was a day of uncertainty, fear, and doubt for many people.

The constant pillars of our country, our economic and military strength, were attacked and nearly 3,000 people died. The twin towers and the Pentagon were found to be defenseless if people were willing to die in order to assault them.

But we don't have to go to history to find uncertainty, fear, and sadness; the death of a loved one removes a constant in our lives, and the future becomes murky.

A bad medical diagnosis, the loss of a job, moving to a new home in a strange place, friends turning on you, and letting you down - all can lead to variable, unsettling times.

Times when we feel the ground giving way beneath us and the variables piling up. Not knowing what to do, we echo the father of the demon possessed boy: **Lord, "I believe; help my unbelief!"**

And there is your constant. When all the variables - and even the constants - in our lives that we thought we could count on have let us down, there is One who remains constant.

There is One who is reliable. Only One who is the constant to solve the variables. Only One who, as we prayed, is ***our stronghold and defense in every need.***

The One who, as Isaiah said, **set His face like a flint** to go to the cross. The cross where there is *nothing* variable.

The cross where there is only the constant of the love of God laying down His life for you;

the constant of the love of God taking your sin away from you and paying for it Himself;

the constant of the love of God to provide for you what otherwise you would not have - life and hope. And so you have one constant in this variable life: Jesus. **PAUSE**

In answer to this father's need, Jesus drives out the unclean spirit with His Word. Good, right? Well, yes, though at first, it seems as if Jesus'

exorcism had been a colossal failure, that instead of saving the boy, He has killed him!

For, we are told, **he looked like a corpse and most of them said, "He is dead."** But no - our constant remains constant, and what looks like death is turned to life.

Jesus takes him by the hand and raises him to a new life.

It is a small picture of the cross - another place where it seems as if this God's plan had all been a colossal failure!

On the cross instead of being saved, another son *was* killed and *was* in fact a corpse and *was* placed dead into the ground. It certainly appeared as if the Lord of unclean spirits had won.

But again, no - our constant remains constant, and death is turned to life. Jesus rises from the dead to a new life.

And that is a picture of what has happened to you as well. Jesus has come to you and driven out your unclean spirit with His Word and water in Holy Baptism.

Good, right? Well, yes . . . though at first, perhaps you look at your life and it seems as if this has been a colossal failure!

For still, you are mired in sin and death instead of life.

But no - your constant remains constant, as in the midst of sin and death Jesus here and now reaches out His hand and raises you in forgiveness;

as Jesus reaches out His hand and feeds you with His own body and blood; as Jesus reaches out to you and gives you new life.

And these promises of God are our constants, our hope, and our key to life in a very uncertain world.

Now, Satan wants you to think otherwise - that Jesus is just another variable in your life, another thing you cannot rely on.

And we believe the father of all lies sometimes, don't we? Wondering about God, what He is doing, why He isn't doing what we think He should, and thinking Him unreliable.

And so the father's prayer/statement in our Gospel text is the prayer of believers of all times, "**Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.**"

Yet despite the fickleness/shallowness of our faith still, Jesus remains constant, and as the Holy Spirit works repentance in us, we are turned back to our constant and receive from Him what will not fail - His forgiveness and life.

That is the meaning of that curious statement at the end of the Gospel today when Jesus says that **“This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.”**

That *doesn't* mean that prayer is some sort of magic formula to defeat demons, nor does it mean that this was some sort of “super demon” - but that there is only one power, one constant, that can give us life, and that is Jesus.

Prayer is the voice of faith. Faith that turns to our Lord for all that is needed, repenting and despairing of ourselves and turning to Him where He has promised to be for us, to receive what He has promised to give to us. And He does not let us down!

Like the disciples, we have to learn that. Perhaps you too, think you should be able to do it. Maybe you, too, have turned to Jesus and said, **“How come I can't do it?”** How come I keep failing and sinning and doubting and falling?

The truth is that you could never do it! ***The good news*** is that you don't have to.

Jesus came and did it for you. His perfect life, His death in your place, His resurrection from the dead, His forgiveness and salvation, His life and hope - all are your gifts from Him.

Jesus does what you can't, to give you what you do not have. From the first page of your life to the last, He is the constant. His forgiveness, His life, His love, giving you peace and hope and joy.

Giving, until that day when His voice will call again and He reaches out His hand - *one more time* - to take hold of you and pull you from the grave.

On that great and glorious day, *all* variables will finally pass away, and Christ, our constant, will be all in all. Lord, keep us in the one true faith until you make all things new. AMEN