

# “Pancake Prayers”

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Mark 9: 9-10; 14-29

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This picture portrays the Transfiguration.



Jesus is on top of a mountain and is dazzling white. The few disciples who are with Jesus see him with spiritual eyes as well as physical eyes. They are blessed and overwhelmed at seeing a glimpse of who Jesus really is — and the Transfiguration on the mountain ends up being a foreshadowing of the resurrection of Jesus. Instead of just seeing the earthly Jesus they see the ‘Christ who was and is and is to come’. Normally I focus on the mountain for this Sunday before Lent, but this morning I want to follow Jesus back down into

the valley.

From the incredible mountaintop experience, Jesus and a chosen few come down the mountain and find a totally chaotic scene. There is a crowd of people, and at the center are the rest of the disciples. They are in the middle of an argument with some scribes about a father who has brought his son to them for healing. The description of the son’s condition is horrible and chaotic. They say he is possessed by a demon. To our modern ears it sounds like he is having grand mal seizures—and he probably is. When it seizes him, he is rigid and foaming at the mouth, and often ends up throwing himself into the fire or the water. Whatever it is, it’s terrifying for everyone, and it’s beyond anyone’s ability to control, solve or fix.

Someone recently gave me a wonderful question: *If this were a dream, what would it symbolize?* In other words, moving it from the face value of the story to a more symbolic level, what does it mean for us? If this were a dream it would symbolize an impossible, terrifying and totally-beyond-our-control situation that we care deeply about. Total messes that we care about.

Do we have any of those?

We can certainly think of a lot in the world that could meet that description: the situation with the Wet’suet’en Indigenous pipeline dispute is one. It is incredibly complex both legally and with regards to justice. The pain both from past abuse and injustice and embodied in the current protests—which has resulted in other people being deeply affected and hurt through lay-offs and the economy taking a massive hit—the pain ripples out and out and out.

There are so many other examples of huge messes that we care about. I think of Israel and Palestine. I think of Syria and the seemingly never-ending

turmoil there. I also think closer to home of the conviction that was handed down this week to the young teen in the killing of Damian Sobieraj. She was convicted on all counts. But there was a crowd of teens who witnessed it and all had cell phones but none of them called police, and when the police showed up just a short time later the teens all denied knowing anything about a 911 call that had been made by Damian.

What about in your own life?

I could give you a long list that I've heard just this past week alone. I heard 2 very different stories of children who desperately need to put their parent into long term care. For different reasons it's not happening, and the resulting pain and injury is immense.

What about complex or chronic medical conditions that won't be fixed by one pill? Whether it is about health or finances or relationships or your work; so many of our problems are messy and not easy to solve. Our Prayer Wall is full of these messes that people care deeply about. It is filled with cries for help.

The father and Jesus saw the boy's ailment as a demon. Was it? Yes. Again, on a more symbolic level, if you were to draw a picture of that horrifying, chaotic, beyond our control situation — it would be a pretty ugly creature. Not the boy. He is a beautiful child of God. Look at some of those situations I mentioned. Can you see the ugliness in them? Can you see the demons? Not in the actual people; not in the Indigenous person protesting or the laid-off rail worker; not in your parent; not in the lost teenager. Each one of these is a child of God. Each one of us is a child of God. But the mess—that is something else.

Jesus arrives on the scene and the father of the boy says to Jesus: *"...but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us."* And then come 2 of my favourite verses in the Bible: *"Jesus said to the father, 'If you are able! – All things are possible to one who believes. 'Immediately the father of the child cried out, 'I believe; help my unbelief!'"* Mark 9: 23-24

I don't know about you, but I so relate to the prayer of the father: "I believe, help my unbelief!" Doubting and believing always mingle together. Don't let your doubting stop you from believing! That sounds like a funny thing to say, but some people think that if you are going to be a Christian, like a *real* Christian, then you can't have any doubts at all! That is simply not true. I feel like my faith has grown stronger each year — not in a beautiful 45-degree angle trajectory — more like the stock market where there are ups and downs and wild highs and crashing lows, but overall the trajectory is up. I know my faith is deeper or stronger but I still have doubts — but like the father in the story, they are not going to stop me from bringing the overwhelming messes of my life to Jesus to heal and to transform.

The question the disciples had for Jesus later on in private was: "Why could we not cast it out?" and Jesus answered: "This kind can come out only through prayer." Which makes you wonder what the disciples were doing? As Christians we are also called to bring these situations to Jesus in prayer. We are

much more inclined to try to 'fix 'the problem and to 'do 'something than we are to stop and pray and seek God's guidance. I believe prayer can change things.

Sometimes we are called to love the messes and to wait prayerfully for fullness of time, for Jesus to come down the mountain. There are some messes in life that we can't fix and may not be fixed in our lifetime. In these cases, the prayer gives us peace and strength in the middle of a difficult situation. But there are some other messes where prayer just changes things.

What are you being called to pray for? What concerns do you have in your life that needs prayer? What is our church being called to pray for?

This coming week we begin Lent. I would like us to take the season of Lent to go deeper with our prayer life and to practice praying for big and small things that we care about.

To launch this time, on Tuesday we will have Pancakes and Prayers. (Hence the title of my sermon "Pancake Prayers." I could go into the symbolism of the messiness of the pancake batter and how when we add the heat and the maple-syrup-sweetness of prayer something marvelous is created...but I'd probably be stretching things a little too far!) Anyway, come and check it out. If you are not comfortable praying out loud we have the prayer written out for you so you won't at all be put on the spot. There will be opportunity to give thanks for what God has done in our church and in our lives and to pray for concerns in our church and in our lives.

Let me share a story about a church that knows how to pray. Three years ago I was at a multi-denominational conference called Church Renewal. It was held at a large church where, once a month, they hold what they call a Prayer Summit. The people who attend are led through a variety of prayer practices. In one of the prayer practices they wanted those of us who were delegates to the conference to spread out across the sanctuary and join other small groups, so that the members of their church could pray for us.



There were a lot of people — the sanctuary seats 2,000 and it was pretty much full, and the leader encouraged us to move quickly and find any open group, so I did. I found a group that didn't seem to have a delegate and then I sat down and looked and thought "Oh no, they are all young men." They were teenagers—complete with hoodies and jeans and ball caps on backwards! We started making introductions and this group of guys reminded me a lot of my teenage son Stanley (who was 15 at the time) and his buddies.

It turns out that they were a little older than my son, around 18-19. I started asking them if they worked at the church or were looking at becoming youth pastors, and they said no. I kept asking questions, sort of beating around the

bush to the real question I wanted to know which was: “*Why are you here?*” “*Why are you at a 2-hour prayer meeting on a Sunday night??*” I figured there had to be a reason. They were too old for it to be their parents making them go to church and so I figured there had to be another reason...like maybe they were taking some course and attending a prayer meeting was one of the required elements. But it became increasingly clear that they didn’t *have* to be there – that they *chose* to be there. I felt like I was looking at the Polkaroo. (you know from Romper Room?)

I need to make it clear that they looked like your average teenager/young adult. One guy was apprenticing to be an electrician; another was working at the Canadian Tire store. They just seemed so much like my son and his buddies and yet they were in church on a Sunday night for a prayer meeting—it just wasn’t computing in my pea-sized brain. Anyway they asked what I wanted prayer for, and I said: “There is no one in my church that looks like you.”

You have to understand this isn’t just a demographic that is missing from my church or the United Church. The ‘young adult male’ is a demographic that is missing from evangelical churches too. So I said: “Pray that there would be people in the church that look like you.”

I also asked for prayers for my son Stanley. I told them my son only attends church very rarely and added: “I don’t blame him, because there is really nothing for him at our church. We don’t have a youth program.”

First, they did a listening prayer — they listened in silence and were open to any thoughts, words or pictures that might come to mind. Then after about a minute or so they went around and shared what they had heard. One guy quoted Isaiah 43 and said that the verse “I am doing a new thing” came to mind. Another guy said: “I don’t know if Stanley plays hockey but I pictured Stanley on a hockey team” and he said: “It was like I was on Stanley’s team too – like we were a team together and I needed to encourage him.”

At this point I started to lose it. I started to cry. They didn’t know that Stanley played hockey and so much of what they were saying just resonated. Then they prayed for me and I lost it even more. Here you’d think it might be the minister who was praying for the lost youth of today, when it was the youth who were praying for a weary and lost middle-aged minister!

When I came home the next day, I told my son about the experience.

He told me “That’s weird.... you know what? When I was driving to hockey last night with my coach, I had the funniest feeling come over me. All of a sudden I felt like I was going to score a goal.” Now Stanley had not scored a goal all season, and it was bugging him. He played defence so it’s not really his job to score goals, but still ... *That night, Stanley scored 2 goals!*

So why were those young men in church on a Sunday night praying? They weren’t there because they had to be or because they ought to be. I suspect they discovered that when they brought their messes to Jesus in prayer, things changed. Sometimes they changed and sometimes the situation changed. Quite

simply, they had experienced something of the transforming power of God. That is an incredible thing to experience. God was very real to them. They knew that prayer changes things, in their lives, in their church, in the world.

The funny thing is that from different parts of our church we keep being called to pray for youth. It doesn't make a lot of sense to me because we still don't have many youth here at the church, but for some reason the Holy Spirit keeps calling us to pray for how we as a church might make a difference to the youth in our community.

God knows our youth need hope and new life. So that is one of the big messes that we will continue to pray into until we have direction.

Don't hesitate to pray:

*"Lord, if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us."*

Listen to Jesus remind us: *"All things are possible to one who believes."*

And may we respond: *"I believe; help my unbelief."*

Thanks be to God. Amen.