

## **Faith That Grows**

**First in a Series of Four Sermons, “Faith Alive!”**

**October 1 and 2, 2022 / LWML Sunday / Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Luke 17 - Pay attention to yourselves! If our brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.” The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”**

### **Sermon Series - Faith Alive**

- **Faith That Grows** / Faith That Gives Thanks / Faith That Persists / Faith That Begs

Dear Friends in Christ,

A certain guest pastor preached a very carefully prepared sermon one Sunday. After the service, he stood outside the church with the host pastor and greeted the parishioners. He received all kinds of kind comments and accolades and the usual “good sermon, Reverend,” and “that was a fine message, Pastor.” Except for one man who came through, shook his hand, and barked, “That was a terrible sermon.”

To make matters worse, he got back into line, came around a second time, and said it again, “That was a terrible sermon.” And for good measure, he added, “The stories in your sermon were boring! I’ve been hearing the same ones since I was a little boy.”

About this time, the host pastor intervened. He tried to make things better by quietly taking the guest pastor off to the side. He whispered into his ear. Don’t pay any attention to that man. He’s not very bright. He just repeats what he hears everyone else saying.”

Our overall sermon series theme in October is “Faith Alive.” This theme will reflect the great Reformation themes of Grace Alone, Faith Alone, Scripture Alone, Christ Alone. Two newer songs we will be singing are a couple of my favorites, “In Christ Alone” and “Grace Alone.”

Luther wrote once that Christian faith is *a living daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times.*”

Next weekend, our theme is “Faith That Gives Thanks.” Two weeks from today - “Faith That Persists.” Three weeks from today - “Faith That Begs.” Today, “Faith That is Growing.”

At our home on Main Street in Janesville, MN, we had a wall right next to our fridge in the kitchen where we measured our son's and then our grandchildren's heights over the years. It was fun, in particular, for the grandchildren, to be measured up against each other and one of their favorite uncles, Noah Lee.

Today, we give thought to whether our faith in Jesus Christ is growing. Do we have more of the Holy Spirit today than five years ago? Ten years ago? 50 years ago? If there was a way to measure patience, gentleness, self-control, and the other fruits of the Spirit, what would the record show?

Since I'm a lifelong Lutheran, I've earned the right to make fun of Lutherans. Right? And so I have said on more than one occasion that watching Lutherans grow in their faith is like watching a field of corn grow.

Our lessons for today suggest one main truth about a faith that is growing - it asks good questions. Two questions arise - the first from today's Gospel, and the second from our Epistle Lesson. Question #1 is this, "Lord, could you please increase our faith? And question #2 is this, "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

## **Asks for more faith to be added**

The first step in solving a problem, of course, is recognizing and admitting that problem.

I'm reminded of a time 30 years ago or so, when I was busy setting a bad example for my son and anybody else paying attention to this well-known pastor in a community of 2000 people. In that day, I am now ashamed to say, I had a reputation for offering unsolicited advice to referees at local wrestling matches and basketball games. (That's code for "yelling at the refs.) One night, I was sitting with my son Noah, who was about 8 years old. We were watching our older son Nate wrestling, and all of a sudden we hear our younger son let loose with a lingo something like this - "that was a terrible call, you stupid ref, open your eyes."

My first reaction was to look at him in horror, to scold him, and to tell him I never wanted to hear him say stuff like that again. To which he replied, "Why not? You say things like that all the time."

What kind of a father would teach his 8 year old son to yell at the referees? The father who had developed a habit of losing perspective and blurting before he thinks things through, that's who. And what was that father's real problem? To use the language of today's text, he needed a stronger faith. A faith that would keep him from making a fool out of himself and bringing dishonor to His Savior at the local gymnasium.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus would look that father straight in the eyes and declare," ***Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come!*** And if the father still isn't getting it, Jesus adds, and I paraphrase, "If you're going to lead little ones into sin, it would have been better if you had never been born."

To which there is only one good response, which is to realize that the answer to every one of our bad habits and spiritual problems in life is to have a stronger faith. That's how the disciples responded when they prayed simply, Lord, "Increase our faith!"

When I think of Christians interested in growing and maturing in their relationship to Jesus Christ, I think of Lutheran Women's Missionary League meetings. And I'm not just saying that to get in good with the women. Although that's a really good thing to do.

(I've been going to Ladies Aid meetings for over 65 years or so. (Mom would drive our 60 Mercury Monterey / pick up Betty Cink / Myrtle Strege / Frieda Krause / each would want to give Mom 25 cents for gas, Mom would say no, they would insist, she would direct them to the mite box on the dash / at the meetings, they would study the Bible topic / enjoy fellowship / eventually enjoy sandwiches, pickles, apple pie and ice cream, but at the heart of this second Wednesday of the month experience, they were praying, Lord, please add to our faith.

Every time ladies and gentlemen in every generation make their way into the Divine services and Bible classes of their local congregations, they are in effect petitioning, Lord, please add to our faith. Every time we retreat into our quiet places with our Scriptures and our prayer journals, whether it be in times of prosperity or adversity, we are, in effect, requesting, "Lord, please add to our faith."

Today's Gospel lesson continues the theme of last Sunday's sermon, where we saw a rich man living in luxury, but ignoring the obvious needs of a poor beggar nearby. You may remember that his obvious failure to be generous with his riches was merely a symptom of his basic problem - his refusal to repent of his sins and believe in Jesus as the Messiah.

In today's Gospel, Jesus spoke to the disciples not one nor two, but three hard sayings.

- Hard saying #1 was that they were to be so very careful in their preaching and teaching so that the vulnerable and the poor and the outcast in their care would never be led astray.
- Hard saying #2 was that whenever people in their care fell into sin, they were to rebuke them towards repentance and never to be guilty of tolerating bad behavior for the sake of a false peace.

- Hard saying #3 was that the disciples were never to become stumbling blocks by withholding forgiveness that should be extended to repentant sinners.

The disciples immediately recognize that they lack the necessary faith to do all that is requested. They look at the huge assignment that lies before them, and they are certain of but one thing - they need a greater faith.

Jesus replies by urging them to use the faith they have already been given. “If you have faith as a kernel of mustard, you would say to this mulberry tree “be uprooted and be planted in the sea! And it would have obeyed you.” One of my favorite scholars, Lenski, comments, “For faith is a vessel. Its power lies not in being a vessel, but in what it contains as a vessel. Faith embraces the divine promises, and when it makes use of these promises, its greatness and its power appear, and it can do all that Jesus asks.”

The kingdom of God is like a family whose home has been destroyed by the storm named Ian. Possessions that were here and just fine a few days ago are gone. Hopes and dreams and certainties have given way to worries and nightmares and unknowns - with one important exception. The One Who spared not His only Son, but gave him up for us all, is still with them. His promises remain true, and in those promises they rest.

## **Asks who who could possibly be successful “against us”**

The argument of Romans 8 is from the greater to the lesser. If God gave the supreme gift of his Son to save us, certainly He will also give whatever is necessary to bring to fulfillment the work begun at the cross.

The critics of Christianity are out in full force this week. They argue from what they can see with their eyes and make conclusions about what they cannot see. They see that a Category 4 hurricane has wreaked havoc upon a part of Florida that includes all kinds of Bible believing Christians and they wonder if it really is true that Jesus and His angels are watching over us and protecting us.

Christians with a growing faith ask, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” To which the cynics and the skeptics respond, “Well it looks as if the forces of nature are against you and as if they have won the day. How can you really be sure that God is for you?”

To which the folks with a growing faith respond, “We’ve seen it with our own eyes in the past - that God in fact has a way of working things out for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purposes.....you can be sure that volunteers both Christians and non-Christians alike will be showing up by the thousands with their chain saws and cases of water and power drills and hammers and a desire to serve, and

first responders and skilled workers of all kinds will be reporting for duty, and that in every corner of Florida and beyond, God's Name is going to be getting glory and neighbors are going to be befriending neighbors and the love of Jesus is going to be winning the day in ways that maybe make the news, and maybe it doesn't make the news.

The Good News will always be that the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church of Jesus Christ. Oh the storms will rage and the winds will seem to be in charge and the waves will apparently be winning the victory, but nothing will ever separate us from the love of Jesus Christ. The forces of darkness are evil and they are sinister and they are nasty, but the love of Christ is pure and clean and eternal. The devil and his demons are ugly and they are sly and they are charming, but our Savior is beautiful and His forgiveness is life changing and wisdom from on high is able to rule the day every time it is applied. The temptations of the flesh are compelling and the lure of worldly conventional wisdom is attractive. But the Law and the Gospel of God's Word, as often as they are properly divided and preached and listened to and practiced, will see to it that *in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*

Or to say it another way, that in all these things, we will be a dearly loved and precious and forgiven people, with a faith that is growing up into Jesus Christ. Amen.