

Faith That Begs
October 22 and 23, 2022
20th Sunday after Pentecost
Fourth in a Series of Sermons, “Faith Alive”

Genesis 4:13-14, “Cain said to the Lord, My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold you have driven me today away from the ground, and from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.”

Luke 18: But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God be merciful to me, a sinner!’”

Dear Friends in Christ

- Last week - “A Faith That Persists” / keeps on praying and will not lose heart (parable of widow and unrighteous judge)
- Two weeks ago - “Faith That Gives Thanks” / both words of thanksgiving (Samaritan leper) and life of thankful living (Ruth)
- Three weeks ago - “Faith That is Growing” (disciples and Paul living life, listening to Jesus, asking good questions)
- Our overall theme has been “Faith Alive.” The writer to the Hebrews defined faith as *the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*”
- *Luther wrote that Christian faith is to be a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times.*

Today’s lessons show us clearly how challenging it is to have a faith that is alive and daring and confident. How fierce is the battle between sin and God’s grace! How difficult it is to stay on the narrow road of salvation, as did Abel in today’s Old Testament lesson and the publican in today’s Gospel. And how easy it is to stray off onto the shoulder of the road and even onto the wide and heavily traveled road of destruction, as did Cain in Genesis and the Pharisee in today’s parable.

Already in the fourth chapter of the Bible, we find God trying to warn Cain about the anger that was growing out of control inside of him, **“Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.”**

Sin is crouching at the door. That reminds me of me crouching in the darkness of our garage in Janesville / jumping out and scaring our teenage daughter Michelle / Michelle screaming a scream that may well have been heard blocks away / Michelle jumping as high as she may have ever jumped before / Michelle as annoyed with her dad as she often has been / oh what fun it was to frighten her when she least expected it!)

I tell you that story first of all because it's a fun story to tell. Secondly, because it helps me to make the point that the devil and his demons are nasty, they are deceitful, and they are good at what they do. Peter writes that the devil is like a roaring lion stalking about, seeking victims that he might devour. Paul warns the Ephesians that they need to put on the full armor of God, both offensive and defensive weapons, if they think they are going to be able to withstand the schemes of the forces of darkness. In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus holds up a mirror to the Pharisees who were trusting in their own good behavior for their salvation and treating others with contempt. And he would invite us to learn from the publican the beauty of having a faith that cries out again and again for God to do what He delights in doing - showing mercy!

Two lessons we would learn today about withstanding the schemes of darkness, as we think about sin crouching at the doors of our lives and looking over our shoulders for the devil as a lion stalking around waiting for an opportunity to harm us. Two lessons, and is often the case, the first is the Law, and the second is the Gospel. ***Lesson #1 is to know that we need help. (Law) And lesson #2 is to know where to go for the help that we need. (Gospel)***

Lesson #1 is to know that we need help. (Law)

One of the purposes of the Law of God is that of a mirror. Paul writes to the Romans that "Through the Law comes the knowledge of sin."

The Pharisee in our parable is like the Fonz from Happy Days. When he looked into the mirror, he liked what he saw. He didn't just fast once or twice a year like normal Jews, he fasted twice a week. He didn't just obey the Ten Commandments, he and his Pharisee buddies had surrounded the commandments with a hedge of over 600 additional and more specific regulations and rules. He didn't just go to church on the high festivals, he went every week and even attended Advent and Lenten midweek services. He didn't just tithe his net income, he gave ten percent of his gross income, including his 401k and tax sheltered annuity earnings! His prayer wasn't at all begging for mercy, it was telling God how lucky He was to

have him as a follower. He thanked God that he was not like other men who are greedy or adulterers or worse yet - that tax collector standing nearby.

The publican, on the other hand, looked into the mirror of God's law, and knew that he needed help. His humility was evident in two ways. First, he could not even raise his eyes to the heavens, which was normal for Jews to do in time of prayer. And secondly, he beat his chest as a sign of his unworthiness. The only other time we find such a beating of the chest recorded in the New Testament is in Luke 23. Right after Jesus breathes calls out with a loud voice on the cross, ***Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit***.....he breathes his last...the centurion sees what has happened, praises God and says, certainly this man was innocent, ***“And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts.***

When Cain looked into the mirror, he was angry. Not with himself, as he should have been. But with God, for not accepting his offering and instead favoring his brother's gift at the altar. In Cain's case, he had the advantage of one on one counseling from God Himself. God knew that Cain's heart was bitter and that his anger had shown up on his face. God asked him about it. He reminded him that if he would have given the right offering with the right attitude, all would be well. But since you did the wrong thing, sin started to crouch at your door, its desire is for you, and you need to get this figured out!

There's an old saying that God helps those who help themselves. Now there may well be some truth to that old saying, which you will find in Aesop's Fables and in Greek proverbs and quoted by Benjamin Franklin. But the better way of saying it is that God helps those who ask for help. As did the publican in today's parable. As did the widow in last week's parable. As did the Samaritan leper in the Gospel lesson two weeks ago. And as did the disciples in the Gospel three weeks ago when they cried out, "Jesus, please add to our faith."

And lesson #2 is to know where to go for the help that we need. (Gospel)

When the publican cried out, "God be merciful to me, a sinner!" he was hoping for God's mercy on the basis of the sacrificial system. A system God had prescribed by way of animal sacrifices centered there in the temple. He was attaching himself in faith to the sacrifices that were offered daily in the temple, just as we approach God through Jesus, the One who offered the once and for all sacrifice at the cross.

When I was a boy listening to this story, I thought this publican was a Republican, in contrast to the Democrats. Not so. The publican derives from publicani. A reference to the public treasury and Rome's system of taxing conquered nations. Their system involved auctioning the rights of tax collecting in specified areas to Roman nobles for sums paid to the public treasury. The Roman nobles would employ citizens of the conquered nations to collect the taxes. The Jews who worked for the Romans as tax collectors would make their living by adding to the amounts they collected. They were considered traitors. They were socially ostracized and were excluded from the synagogues. Tax collectors and sinners became a proverbial phrase for those outside the family of faith. Jesus was often criticized by the Pharisees for accepting and eating with "tax collectors/publicans and open sinners /gluttons/drunks/prostitutes/adulterers, etc.

The tax collector cries out, "God be merciful to be a sinner!" And Jesus replies, "I tell you, this man went down to his house, justified.

A thief on the cross cries out, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus answers, "Today, thou shalt be with me in paradise."

A woman in her 70's is alone these days. She's looking back on her life, including a marriage that ended badly, including a couple of bad habits she now regrets, including bridges that she has burned and now it's too late to repair them. She cries out, "Lord Jesus, "I'm so sorry. I can't do this anymore. I feel like my guilt is following me around like a shadow." To which John the Baptist whispers, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the guilt of your sin, He takes away the power of your sins, He takes away the consequences of your sin."

A man in his 80's is looking into the mirror these days. He's remembering the times he drank too much, the times he was full of himself, the times he was crabby or lazy or selfish or inattentive or just plain ornery. He looks to the cross, where His Savior was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace. He chokes out the words, "Please forgive me." To which Jesus answers, "Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace."

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers full of folks who have their forgetful days, their decent days, and their amazing days.

On their forgetful days, they rush right into their schedules. They compare their lives to others and feel pretty good about themselves.

On their decent days, they confess their faults and their failures before God, they know that they are the loved and forgiven people of God, they make it through the day, but nothing to write home about.

On their amazing days, they live at the foot of the cross. Their eyes are fixed on Jesus, the author and the finisher of their faith. Their joy is deep, it is abiding, it is contagious, and it is sustained by two lessons they have learned over the years. Lesson #1 is to know they need help. Lesson #2 is to know where to find the help they need. In Jesus' Name. Amen.