

The Twenty-first Sunday after Trinity
10 October, Anno Domini 2021
St. John 4:46-54
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

Do you have a living or a dead faith? That is the question that is put before us this morning as Jesus engages this desperate father whose son is about to die. It's also quite a popular question in today's Christian circles. Unfortunately, the question that is really being asked is "Are you a busy Christian?" The thinking goes that real Christians take mission trips, volunteer at the church all the time, are excited to share the love of Jesus with everyone walking down the street.

But true living faith is something very different. Do we see Jesus urging the father to simply do more and then the blessings of God will be able to reign down on him without measure? In fact, we see almost the opposite. Instead of patting the father on the back and congratulating him on his faith, Jesus seems to turn against him. This man believed something; otherwise he wouldn't have come to Jesus. But the father's was a faith that had not yet been tested and Jesus knew that it needed to be. It wasn't yet faith in the Word of Jesus. It was a faith built on sight and proof rather than promises. It was a faith that thought only if Jesus was standing right there could He help. This is the kind of faith that easily falls prey to doubt when jobs are lost, cancer strikes, days don't go as planned, your house, your health, your mind and your body are all a wreck, or death itself draws near. Faith built on circumstance, faith resting on the presence of blessing and the absence of struggle is dead faith. It's really not faith at all.

If faith exists only in the presence of proof, if we only trust in Jesus if things are going well, if faith is the assurance of things seen, then Jesus isn't much of a salesman because His response to the pleas of the believing father "Unless you see signs and miracles and wonders you will never believe" sounds more like a rebuke and refusal to help. Hey, hold on, Jesus. Give the guy a break. He's doing the best he can do. Cut him some slack. You should be happy that he believed at all. But Jesus isn't satisfied. Not because he doesn't love the man or care about his son – just the opposite. Jesus wants to strengthen and deepen the man's faith just as He wants to strengthen yours. But that doesn't happen by anything you or I or the father could ever go out and do.

Faith is purified like precious metals – going through the furnace of fire, tribulation and testing. Our Lord wants none of our self-righteousness, none of our Old Adam still clinging to us. God Himself must strengthen that faith that He has given.

Faith is tested and hardened and strengthened by suffering, by being stretched and pushed. Living faith is faith that is wrestling, struggling, striving with God, constantly having to reconcile what it sees and feels and experiences with what the Word God has spoken, the promises God has made. Like our forefather Jacob, our Lord and Father makes us promises of life and blessing and then turns around and fights with us, appearing almost like a liar – giving only to take away, blessing only to curse. But He does it to prepare us for the real fight.

We are in a battle – not against flesh and blood, not against presidents or elected officials, not against men who would seek to harm our bodies. Our main concern isn't the Constitution or the Bill of Rights or our borders. We are in battle against forces far darker, far more powerful, and with far more evil intentions. We are at war against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over the present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. These enemies are relentless and vicious. They attack with laser precision and at an hour that you least expect. They know how to manipulate and break a person in the deepest part of their soul. They have one goal - to tear the promises of God away from you. To make you believe that God has abandoned you, lied to you, and completely forsaken you. And there is nothing these ancient enemies love more than when we try to defend ourselves and take refuge behind the goodness of our works, or our commitment to be a disciple of Jesus. Our prayers, our works, our faith, our good deeds are all nothing – paper-thin walls easily toppled and trampled by Satan's hordes.

This is why you and the rest of God's children seem to undergo such continuous trials. Our Lord is molding and shaping your faith into a living one, one that doesn't take up fanciful powerless weapons of piety or empty self-righteousness, one that is constantly prepared for battle, one that is ready to fight during periods of long, grueling darkness, one that never stops clinging to the Word. As we are pushed and stretched by tribulation and cross, we are trained to take up the only weapons that can defend us and actually press the attack against Satan's legions – the truth of our own weakness and depravity, the righteousness of our crucified Savior, the Gospel of peace between God and man through the Blood of the Lamb, faith which clings at all times, not to itself, but to Jesus who has overcome Satan, sin, and death.

These are the weapons of the faithful. Don't cling to signs and miracles and wonders. Don't wait for Jesus to speak to you in your heart - He won't. He has spoken to you in Baptism, promising you the forgiveness of all your sins, promising you the aid and comfort of the Holy Spirit, promising you eternal life.

When Satan comes knocking, reminding you of your weak faith, your sins of thought, word, and deed, don't look inside yourself for help. Hold up in his face the Body and Blood that Jesus holds up for you and feeds to you to reassure you that He died for YOUR sins, that He has saved YOU, that YOUR guilt has been removed. Remind Satan that he has been defeated and has nothing to use against you, nothing to offer you. Even though these things don't look like much to the eyes, faith knows better because faith hears the powerful promises of God attached to them – promises that they can cast down demons, drive back Satan's pressing assault, survive endless onslaughts of temptation, and bring you the absolute victory of Good Friday and Easter.

It was these weapons that Jesus taught the father to cling to. Words. Promises. Hope. Jesus knows that death lies ahead and he works daily to prepare us. The father's faith was too dependent on Jesus' physical presence, physical evidence. Such a faith can't long survive the dark times when Jesus couldn't possibly feel any further away. And so rightly Jesus checks this faith and says "My son, you are trusting in the wrong thing. Do you believe that I am merciful and will help you even though you don't see me? What will you cling to when I ascend to the Father and you no longer behold me with your eyes? No, your hope and confidence must lie in something else. You must rely on my Word. I don't need to be standing next to your son or reach out my hand and touch him. I created everything that exists by my Word. I spoke and it was so and it was very good. You must cling to what I have spoken, you must hold firmly to my promise of mercy even when I myself seem to say something different, when I am the one causing you pain and heartache. Listen to nothing else but my voice. Believe nothing else. Take comfort in nothing else." Jesus wouldn't pander to the man's weak faith. He did something much greater – He strengthened it. He forced it to fight and wrestle against its carnal desire to seek more than the Word. Jesus healed the boy but all he would give to the father is a word – "Go; your son lives." He didn't say when or how. Jesus only promised that the boy lives. This is how the Lord creates living faith – He challenges and attacks it and by doing that trains it.

Baptized children of the heavenly Father, when things are hard and even God Himself seems to be against you, rejoice! The Lord disciplines those whom He loves in order to protect them and keep them safe. Don't be afraid. A faith that is being poked, stirred, and agitated is a living faith, growing and putting down deep roots into the Word. Your Savior is creating in you a faith that longs daily for every Word that proceeds from His mouth, a faith that can withstand the worst attacks that Satan can launch at you because it is a faith that is built on the solid

rock of God's own promise. May God stir up in you daily a living, active, fighting faith.

In the Name of +Jesus. Amen.

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding, keeps your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord.