

August 7, 2022

Hebrews 11:1

“By Faith!”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In our gospel lesson, Jesus says to his disciples: "... do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on ... O you of little faith ... your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you." Easier said than done isn't it? We often find ourselves fretting and sweating about so many things in this life. Sometimes we are paralyzed with anxiety and worry. We can hardly trust the words of Jesus when he promises us: "... these things will be added to you." Do you believe that Jesus will keep his promise?

This got me thinking. We are supposed to be living **By Faith!** What does it say about us when we as Christians boldly say that we trust that Jesus will save us from death and hell by his cross, and yet we find ourselves fretting and sweating about the little things in life? Isn't it amazing that we say that we trust that Jesus will take care of us in the biggest issue of death and hell, and yet we find ourselves crumbling under little things - what we have and need? If we cannot trust in Jesus when it comes to a basic promise about what we generally need in this life, then how can we trust in him when we breathe our last?

It occurred to me when I was looking at all of our lessons for this morning that it might not be a bad idea to talk about what it means to live **By Faith!** What does it mean to believe? What is the connection between believing in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins and believing in Jesus to take care of us in every day life? There really is a connection between the two. Sweating and fretting about the little things in life, or any promise of Jesus about the down here, can be an indicator of weakness in terms of our trust in him for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. What we believe about the cross and empty tomb is supposed to fortify us in other things.

Let me explain this a bit further. We have been declared righteous for the sake of Jesus who lived a perfect life for us and died on the cross to pay for our sins. He was punished with the punishment that we deserve so that we might escape. This declaration of righteousness is something that we believe. We stake our eternity on it. The Holy Spirit has created and continues to preserve faith in us by the gospel and sacraments. We are merely beggars who receive this gift of the righteousness of Jesus. Faith is properly called righteousness. We are righteous or acceptable before God **By Faith** in the life, sufferings, and death of Jesus his one and only Son.

Now, if we are sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see, and if Jesus promises that in our seeking of his kingdom he will take care of what we need, then what in the world is going on when we find ourselves anxious and worried about food, reputation, livelihood, children, and spouse? Where is our trust in God and our certainty in the fullness of his mercy that is supposed to be flowing from the cross and empty tomb? Disturbing isn't it? Perhaps we should consider that our lack of trust in the little things (the material things of life) may very well point to a weakness in our trusting in Jesus for the big things (the spiritual things).

In Matthew 18:8, we have a word from Jesus concerning this. You will remember that when the disciples forgot to bring bread they had a perception problem about the spiritual statement about the leaven

of the Pharisees. And Jesus said to them, “O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive?” Material issues are connected to spiritual realities. Listen these words of Philip Melanchthon in his *Commonplaces* of 1521:

I do not think that anyone believes in material promises from the heart unless he has already been justified. And I think that God declared his mercy through the promise of material things, because the saints could easily conclude that if God cared for their bodies, he cared much more for their souls. Nor could they deny that God was the Father of their souls when he had already acted as a father to their bodies (pg. 124).

Now please be careful that you do not conclude that fretting and sweating is always a complete loss of faith. Jesus calls it in certain instances “little faith (Matt. 8:26).” We will always struggle with fretting and sweating. The point is this: when we are anxious and worried about the down here, we are to run to the eternal gift of our Savior in his cross and empty tomb to push back the weakness - the “little faith.” We are also invited to consider in the words of Jesus and how God takes care of “the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!” We are more valuable.

What then is faith? Faith is a constant assent to God’s gospel and every word. It does not exist outside of God’s Holy Spirit renewing and enlightening our hearts. Faith is trust in God’s mercy promised in Jesus. This calms the heart and inflames us to give thanks to God for his mercy in everything - and I mean everything. Luther writes:

It is a believing in God which means that I put my trust in Him, give myself up to thinking that I can have dealings with Him, and believe without any doubt that He will be and do to me according to the things said of Him. Such faith which throws itself upon God, whether in life or in death, alone makes a Christians person.

Take for example the faith of our father Abraham in the Old Testament lesson. God promises undeserved mercy to Abraham with magnificent words: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” A little later he promises him descendants. And then we read these words: “And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” What then did Abraham believe? He trusts in a promise that is both material and spiritual. He will have a flesh and blood son even though he is old. And this son will be a sign of the coming of the Savior, the offspring of the woman, who is also the Son of God. Abraham believes that he will have the impossible. Isaac will be born. And in this trust that Isaac will be born, he shows that he believes in the coming of the Savior.

Many examples of this kind of faith are found in Hebrews 11 where people trust in God for a down here blessing that points to a trust in his forever, spiritual promises. At the very start of Hebrews 11 we have this definition: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation.” The writer says this of Abraham and Sarah:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

What they saw in every day promises was connected to what they saw in the spiritual. Abraham and Sarah died in faith, greeting things from afar, while acknowledging that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. Amazing! The book of Hebrews reminds us: “Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.”

So, what are we supposed to take with us from this excursion into an understanding of what it means to believe in the Lord? Well, because we believe that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus, and not by works, we are also able to see the goodness of God in all things including what we may call the little things in life. We are enabled to grow in our trust and push back against the fretting and sweating that would drag us into unbelief. And when trust grows in God’s mercy and goodness, we are enabled to be like Abraham who wandered his entire life in unknown places. But because he was living his life under the shade of God’s promises - **By Faith!** - he was sure that God would deliver on everything. May this also be so for us!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott