

## **Sunday Lent 2 “Faith Born of the Father’s Love”**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

If last Sunday reminded us that we have the victory through Christ, this Sunday brings us right back down to earth. Our life is a faith journey and there are crosses to bear. There are difficult valleys to cross and often we must live by faith and not by sight. The victory is real, but it is also sometimes hard to see. Faith, of course, is what you have when you cannot see the victory, but you need to live in the victory. You cannot see it because of the world around you, and because you yourself are feeling like a miserable failure. Crosses can do that to a person. The Second Sunday in Lent is a reality check for the people of God.

Abraham will long for the fulfillment of the promise and the resolution of the faith tension in his life. If only Ishmael could find favor with God. It would be so much easier. How often our prayers don’t ascend with Abraham’s plaintive cry on our lips that it would be so much easier if God would do it our way. We plead, “God heal the cancer, fix the problem, give me a job, take away this thing that hurts!” And God hears those prayers. Ishmael will be the father of 12 princes, just like Jacob fathered the twelve tribes, but the promise is greater than our desire. God sees what we cannot.

God does not want to heal the cancer just so a stroke can take us in our sleep a few years later. We see only the cancerous growth and the pain and suffering of the chemo. He sees the eternal life and the perfection brought about through the suffering and death of His Son, Jesus Christ. He might not take suffering away, but He may transform that suffering into something holy. And so, He calls us to believe.

We have noticed this before. Greek has two words for believe and we really only have one verb where Greek has two. This is unusual. Normally English has about six words for every Greek concept, but in this case Greek vocabulary is richer. To believe is not exactly the verbal form of the noun “faith.” In biblical terms faith and belief are not entirely synonymous.

As I have suggested before, substituting “faithing” for believing is about the only way to do it. To believe involves an evaluation of what has been said, either accepting or rejecting it. Belief is rather propositional. We might believe something, perhaps on the basis of its likelihood or perhaps on the basis of the speaker’s history with us, perhaps simply because we are feeling good that day.

Faith, on the other hand, is a much more relational word. Faith runs with words like “friendship,” “fatherhood,” “marriage,” and “family.” It is not only about accepting the truth of the words said but also about the person who says them. God is not asking us to evaluate what He says and render a judgment of whether it is rational and therefore believable; God is asking us to trust the speaker, Himself. We do not believe the words, we believe, we faith the speaker.

In this sense, we might want to reconsider much of the way we conduct ourselves as a church. Argument about the validity of the Word or the plausibility of the Word is not only distant from faith, but it could also be positively counterproductive for the reception of faith; as if we could judge God. We do not further faith when we argue this way. We might in fact be making it more difficult.

A father who embraces his tearful daughter is not asking her to evaluate and render a judgment about his love. He is just loving her and wants her to know that she is his and he is hers and he loves her in spite of the things she may have done to disappoint or hurt him.

When you are arguing with your teenage son about just what you meant by “by home by midnight” and “Here’s what will happen if you don’t,” you are in the realm of whether he believed your words. If you are arguing about those words, the chances are he really does not believe them. When he comes to you and admits he wrecked the car or got the girl pregnant and he needs your help, that conversation is in the world of faith. He knows, even counts on, the truth that you love him, despite what he has done.

The “Our Father” of the Lord’s Prayer, as Luther describes it, is a faith prayer, not a belief prayer. It is a trust in a familial relationship based on love. His love, our response.

The texts today invite us into that relationship, establish that relationship, bestow and strengthen that relationship in our hearers. That relationship empowers us to acts of great mercy and love. We are empowered to the confession of Christ in a world which would laugh and scoff at us or worse simply ignore us.

This day serves to redefine our suffering. Jesus' invitation to us to take up a cross and suffer with him means that our suffering somehow, perhaps clearly, perhaps mysteriously, is a point of contact between us and the mission of Christ. He suffered and saved the world, and won the day. Our experience of the victory of Christ may well come through suffering too.

Although God may work victory for us in ways that we do not foresee, agree with, or even like, there is nothing weak or ineffectual about His victory. It is real. It is present. But the victory also directs our attention way from our selfish desire and narrow vision toward the future, to the Day of the Resurrection. The victory is ours now through faith, but we may not necessarily perceive the victory by sight. We still experience weakness, defeat, and yes, even death. All people certainly will, unless the Lord returns first. Our victory in Christ today by faith is an anticipation of that day when death has been swallowed up in victory.

One of America's most well-known icons is the Nike swoosh logo which adorns athletic equipment and clothes worn by some of the worlds best and most successful athletes. Nike is actually the English rendering of the Greek word for "victory." In an interesting coincidence, St. Paul uses the Greek word "nike" (nikos) in Romans 8 as a way of emphasizing the decisiveness and certainty of Christ's victory over the powers and dominions. Paul writes:

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecutions or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors **through Him who loved us!**"

In Greek, "more than conquerors" is a contraction of two words: hyper and conquerors. Paul goes one up on Nike. We are not merely conquerors, not merely victorious. We are hyper conquerors; we are hyper victorious through Christ Jesus, our Savior. Our standing is firm, our future secure, through Him who loved us.

Ours is not the sort of life that has all the answers or at least has all the comfortable answers. It is often a life in which we take the next step in some sort of anticipation and even dread of what will happen next, like opening the door into a room full of people you don't know, but whom you have to talk to. It could be really good, or it might be a really uncomfortable experience. We simply trust that God goes in the room with us. And thus we go in.

And thus we go in. We go in to His promise that Jesus Christ died for the sins of the world, all people. And that you and your sins are part of **those sins** and **that world**. We go in to His promise that God showed His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. We go in to His promise that since we were buried with Christ by Baptism into His death that we certainly will be raised unto new life just Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father. We go daily into His promise that through Baptism we were made to be children of the Heavenly Father and heirs of His Kingdom. We go in to His promise that we are born again of water and the Holy Spirit.

And all this received by grace through faith. Faith born of the Father's love as demonstrated not just by words, but by The Word, by Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection and attested to by the Holy Spirit.

No wonder they call this place the Ark of God's church that carries us through this fallen world to life everlasting!

May the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesu Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide in you to life everlasting. Amen!