

Sermon for the Twenty-First Sunday after Trinity; John 4:46-54

A Sermon by Martin Luther; taken from his Church Postil.

[THE NOBLEMAN'S SON HEALED. HOW FAITH GROWS AND IS EXERCISED.]

1. Today's Gospel pictures to us a remarkable example of faith, for St. John carefully notes at three different times that the nobleman believed, and we may indeed be greatly moved by the fact, and ask, what kind of faith must he have had, that the Evangelist mentioned it so often. We have already learned so much about faith and the Gospel that I think we should rightly understand it. But since it ever occurs again and again, we are obliged to discuss it frequently.
2. In the first place, I have often said that faith through the Gospel fully brings the Lord Jesus with all his riches home to every man; and that one Christian has just as much as another, and the child baptized today has not less than St. Peter and all the saints in heaven. We are all equal and alike in reference to faith, and one person has his treasure just as full and complete as another.
3. Our Gospel lesson speaks further of the increase of faith, and here there is a difference. Although faith fully possesses Christ and all his riches, yet it must nevertheless be continually kept in motion and exercised, so that it may have assurance, and firmly retain its treasures. There is a difference between having a thing and firmly keeping hold of it, between a strong and a weak faith. Such a great treasure should be firmly seized and well guarded, so that it may not be easily lost or taken from us. I may have it indeed in its entirety, although I hold it only in a paper sack, but it is not so well preserved as if I had it locked in an iron chest.
4. Therefore we must so live on the earth, not that we think of something different that is better to acquire than what we already possess; but that we strive to lay hold of the treasure more and more firmly and securely from day to day. We have no reason to seek anything more than faith; but here we must see to it how faith may grow and become stronger. Thus we, read in the Gospel, that, although the disciples of Christ without doubt believed (for otherwise they had not followed him), yet he often rebuked them on account of their weak faith. They had indeed faith, but when it was put to the test, they let it sink and did not support it. So it is with all Christians; where faith is not continually kept in motion and exercised, it weakens and decreases, so that it must indeed vanish; and yet we do not see nor feel this weakness ourselves, except in times of need and temptation, when unbelief rages too strongly; and yet for that very reason faith must have temptations in which it may battle and grow.
5. Therefore it is not as the idle babblers among the theologians of the schools taught, who make out that we are lazy and careless, by saying: If one have the smallest drop or spark of love and faith, he will be saved. The Scriptures teach that one must increase and progress. True it is that you possess Christ through faith, although you only hold the treasure in a poor cloth; yet you must see to it that you firmly

lay hold of him and let no power rob you of him.

6. Consequently this nobleman or officer, whoever he was (I hold he was a courtier of King Herod), was so far in faith that he believed if he could bring Jesus into his home, he would then surely heal his son; for he had heard God's Word or the Gospel of Christ, that he cheerfully helped every person that was brought to him and refused no one his favour. His faith laid hold of this and that was the reason he went to Christ. For if his heart had been kept in suspense, so that he had thought: Who knows whether he can help you or will help you? he would not have gone to him. Therefore it is certain that he had beforehand so conceived of Christ and believed that he would help him.

7. The nature and manner of faith are to picture and mirror the goodness of Christ thus in the heart of man. Therefore the Epistle to the Hebrews says, in 11, 1: "Faith is the substance of things hoped for," that is, of something good, the grace and goodness of God. Now the faith of this man stood so, that if he had continued in it he would without a doubt have been saved, and the Lord would have had pleasure in it. However, he dealt severely with him, found an imperfection in his faith, chastised him and said: "Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will in no wise believe."

8. How does this agree with what I said before? If faith and a good confidence in him brought the nobleman to Christ, how can he then say: Ye will in no wise believe, unless ye see signs? But, as I said, he wishes to show him that his faith is not yet strong enough; for he still clings only to the seeing and the experience of the bodily present Christ. Likewise did Christ chastise the disciples in the boat, when the storm came and he said to them: "Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?" Mat. 8, 26. As if he were to say: Where is your faith now? Therefore, however good and genuine faith may be, it falls back when it comes to a battle, unless it has been well disciplined and has grown strong.

9. Therefore you should not imagine it is enough if you have commenced to believe; but you must diligently watch that your faith continue firm, or it will vanish; you are to see how you may retain this treasure you have embraced; for Satan concentrates all his skill and strength on how to tear it out of your heart. Therefore the growth of your faith is truly as necessary as its beginning, and indeed more so; but all is the work of God. The young milk-faith is sweet and weak; but when long marches are required and faith is attacked, then God must strengthen it, or it will not hold the field of battle.

10. Therefore this man would not have been helped by the faith he had at first; he would have been forced to retreat had not Christ come and strengthened him. But how did he strengthen him? The nobleman believed, if he came to him in his house, he could surely heal his son. Then Christ gave him a rebuke, a bitter and hard answer: "Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will in no wise believe." With these words he gives faith a scornful rebuff that it can not stand. The poor man was terrified and his faith at once began to sink and to vanish, therefore he says: "Sir, come down ere my child die."

11. As if he would say: Yes, you must hasten and come and yourself be present, or my son will die. Here Christ now bestows upon him a stronger faith, as God does upon all whom he strengthens in faith, and raises him thus to a higher degree or plain that he may become strong and believe in a different way than he did before; and he speaks thus to the father: "Go thy way; thy son liveth."

12. Had he thus said to him before that his son would live he would have been unable to believe; but now he believes when faith springs forth in his heart and begets in him another faith, so that he becomes a different man. Therefore the Lord adds to his great rebuke great strength. For, he must now cling to that which he does not see; for he did not before believe that Christ had such power and influence that he could heal his son when he did not see him and was not present with him. It is truly strong faith, that a heart can believe what it does not see and understand, contrary to all the senses and reason, and can cling only to God's Word. Here there is nothing manifest except that he believed, otherwise he would have received no help. In faith one must look to nothing but the Word of God. Whoever permits anything else to be pictured in his eyes is already lost. Faith clings to the naked and pure Word, neither to its works nor to its merits. If your heart does not thus stand naked, your cause is lost.

13. Let us now take an example of this: When a priest, nun or monk boasts that he has maintained his chastity, said many masses, fasted often, prayed much and the like, and then does not keep in mind God's Word, but his own good works, and, builds upon them, so that he thinks God must consequently hear him, then he is lost; for as long as this picture is in the mind, faith cannot be there. Therefore when one is about to die and death is present, and he looks around for a way of escape and for the first step he should take, then Satan is at hand and pictures to him how dreadful and horrible death is; and besides he sees hell and God's judgment before his eyes. Then Satan is victorious, for there is no help as long as this is before his eyes. If he were wise and pictured nothing else in his heart and continued to cling to the Word of God alone, he would live, for that is a living Word. Therefore, whoever clings to the Word must stand where the living and eternal Word stands.

14. However, this is exceedingly difficult to do; for here you see how hard it was for this nobleman; also, for the Apostles in the Gospel, Mat. 8, 25-26, when they were on the water in a boat and the boat was about to sink and the waves beat into the boat, so that death was before their eyes; then they lost their hold on the Word. Had they firmly believed and said: Here we have the Word of God, here is Christ; where he is, there we are also; there would have been no danger. But since they did not have such faith, they would have had to sink and perish had not Christ come to their help. Just so it was with Peter, when he walked on the sea and came to Christ - so long as he held to the Word, the water had to bear him up; but when he turned his eyes from Christ and he let go the Word he saw the wind blowing and he began to sink.

15. Therefore I said, we must let go of every thing and cling only to the Word; if we have laid hold of that, then let rage and roar the world, death, sin, hell and all misfortune. But if you let go the Word, then you must perish. This we see also in people who seek temporal nourishment: when they have sufficient, and their house and barn are full, they easily trust in God and say, they have a gracious God; but when they have nothing they begin to doubt, then their faith vanishes; for they picture before their eyes, that there is nothing at hand and not any provision in store, and they know not how they shall exist; thus care and worry drive faith out of the heart. But if they would lay hold of God's Word, they would think thus: My God lives, he assures me he will sustain my life; I will go forth and labour, he will make everything right, as Christ says, Mat. 6, 33: "But seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." If I retained this Word and would cast the other out of my mind, I would not come into need. But as long as you picture before your eyes your poverty, you cannot believe. This nobleman doubtless had also a picture in his eyes, that he might have thought: He will not grant my request, he will give me a hard answer, will not accompany me home and will cruelly turn me away. Had he fixed his eyes upon such treatment he would have been lost; but since he turned his eyes from

such thoughts, Christ later gives him blessed consolation and says: "Go thy way; thy son liveth."

16. This is the nature and way of faith:--thus God deals with us, when he wishes to strengthen us. This is also what St. Paul means in 2 Cor. 3, 18, when he says: "But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord the Spirit." The glory of the Lord with Paul is the knowledge of God. Moses also possessed a glory, the knowledge and understanding of the law. When I have a knowledge of the law, I look into his clear countenance and into his pure light. But now we have passed through that and have a higher knowledge of Christ our Lord. Whoever knows him as the man who helps in time of need and gives power to fulfil the law, through whom we have acquired the forgiveness of sins: in that way he mirrors his glory in us. That is, as the rays of the sun are reflected in the water or in a mirror, so Christ reflects himself and gives forth a lustre from himself in our hearts, in a way that we are transformed from one degree of glory to another, so that we daily increase and more clearly know and understand the Lord. Then we shall be changed and transformed into the same image, in a way that we all will be one bread with Christ. This is not accomplished in that we ourselves do it by virtue of our own power; but God, who is the Spirit, must do it. For even if the Holy Spirit began such glory or illumination in us and would later forsake us, then we would be as we were before.

17. Now we ought to be so armed that we do not remain standing still at the first degree, but continually increase; therefore the cross, temptation and opposition must come, by means of which faith will grow and become strong, and as the glory of faith increases, the mortification of the body also increases; the stronger faith is, the weaker will the flesh be, and the smaller the faith, the stronger the flesh, and the less will the flesh be denied. We are apt to think, if I shall continually help my neighbour, what will become of me? To what will I come at last? But if we had mirrored in us true faith and Christ, we would not doubt that we should have enough, but remember that God will surely come to our assistance when the crisis comes. But if we are lost in such a little tempest, what will we do in the great conflicts of the soul? See, in this way faith is exercised and increased; if we go forth, and are today as yesterday, tomorrow as today, that is not a Christian life. Now the second thing for which John praises this man is, that he increased in faith.

18. In the third place, he says: While he was going home, his servants met him and said to him that his son lived, and he experienced that his son began to amend in the very hour that the Lord had said to him, "Thy son liveth;" and he believed and his whole house. Here the Evangelist says again that he believed. But, if he had not believed heretofore why did he come to Christ? This is a more perfect faith, that was confirmed by the miracle. In this manner our Lord God deals with us to make us more perfect and raise us ever to a higher plane of faith. If we pass through this condition, we thus come into the experience and become assured of our faith, as we see here that the nobleman overcomes all difficulties like an iconoclast who tears down pictures and images, receives applause and becomes certain of his cause, in that he has experienced it, and finds that he is helped by faith, and all agree; the time, the miracle and the word with the faith.

19. What then did he now believe? Not that his son had been healed, for this kind of faith is now at an end, the healing has been done, and it is now a thing of the past. He sees before his eyes that his son lives. But out of his experience comes forth another faith, that Christ would in the future continue to help him out of other troubles and whatever dark pictures might rise before him; that is what he believed. If the Lord had said to him: Go and die; he would have replied: Although I do not know

whither I shall go or where the inn is, yet since I tried before what faith is, I will again cling to the Word. You helped me once when I could not see nor understand; you will now again help me. Moreover, if Christ had said to him: Leave home and land and your possessions, and come, follow me; he would not have thought: Yes, but how shall I support myself? No doubt the picture would have appeared before his eyes: There is everything in abundance, here is nothing; shall I let go of that, what will I come to? But now he thinks: Although nothing is here, and I see nothing, I will nevertheless cling to the Word, he will surely help me. I tried it before. This is impossible for reason, but faith can do all things.

20. Therefore faith exercises itself in various temptations and every day new temptations arise; for the former experiences do not always return, as one sees here. This nobleman has already made use of the work of faith, that is now past, it will never return again; but he must now try another. Therefore the oftener a person experiences the same temptation, the better it is for him; the more he triumphs over the storm, the firmer he lays hold of Christ, and becomes skilled so to be ready to bear all that is laid upon him.

21. In like manner it went with the Holy Patriarchs, and thus it always goes with us; so that I believe what has taken place in former times, is of no help to me, but my faith must always turn its attention to things of the future. Therefore, when God called Abraham to depart out of his own country, he did it, and believed it, Gen. 12, If. Now when he came into that country, God called him to go into another and later into another. Thus he continually increased in faith, and later he became so assured, and had traced and experienced how God dealt with him, and became such a perfect character that he was willing to offer his own son as a sacrifice to God. From this it follows: Whoever is greatly tried and disciplined in this way, faces death much more willingly.

22. Thus you see how an example of growing faith is here portrayed; it is now clear enough, therefore take it well to heart. Every person has indeed his own experiences in life by which he may exercise his faith, to trust God to help him. Thus he will be able to prove how God helps him, and he can thus make progress and grow in faith. As soon as one experience ends another always begins, so that we may see and grasp the truth that our Lord God is true. If we have the confidence that he will nourish and sustain our bodies, we can also believe that he will save our souls. I have now spoken enough about faith.

23. The other part of this Gospel, on love, every one can easily understand for himself. It is clearly enough set forth and it is not necessary to speak much about how Christ served and helped this nobleman. He had no advantage or gain from it himself, but he did it purely gratuitously out of love. Also you see how the nobleman became a servant of his son. Whatever there is more in this Gospel belongs to its spiritual significance, and its exposition word for word we will commend to the quiet and wise spirits.

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