

Friends in Christ, grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

“I believe, help my unbelief.”

In our gospel reading this morning we hear of a man who brought his son to Jesus to be healed. Since he was a little boy, the child had been seized by an evil spirit that tormented him, causing him great harm. The description of this boy’s illness makes it clear that it was the central reality of their life. The child is always in danger as a result of this spirit that seizes him. The family must be vigilant at all times to keep him safe. What an exhausting life they have lived. It’s the sort of thing that can easily destroy families, with the toll of caring for one who is ill simply being too much to bear at times. This boy’s father is desperate when he hears that the disciples of the great healer from Galilee are in the area. He hoped that Jesus might be able to do something for his child, for him. But before he could get to Jesus he had to deal with Jesus’ gatekeepers, the disciples. The disciples wanted to try their hand at healing this boy before getting Jesus involved.

I suppose they thought they were doing Jesus a favor. If they could keep even a few of the needy people away from him that would help. He was constantly surrounded by those demanding his services. The sick, the lame, the unclean, the blind, the lost, they all seemed to find their way to Jesus, needing what only he could give. It was a lot. It was a constant parade of hopeless cases.

The disciples tried to weed out some of the easier cases, the ones even their meager faith could take care of. If they could take some of the load off of Jesus’ plate, maybe he’d have a little time to rest. Maybe he’d have a little time for them. And it seems that they thought maybe this boy was one of easier cases. So they tried to heal him. But they failed miserably. They could do nothing to help him.

But the father persisted. He was not going to give up now when help seemed so close. He was not going to let the failure of the disciples send him back home unsatisfied. He would wait. Wait for the one he had come to see in the first place. Wait for the work of the one he hoped might do for him what no one else had been able to. He would wait until Jesus showed up. After all, his disciples were already there. He couldn't be far behind.

And then Jesus showed up and the boy's father had his chance. But he suddenly wasn't certain. He wasn't sure Jesus could do anything for him. It's not hard to imagine that he had consulted with every doctor and healer he could find throughout his son's life. He had been disappointed again and again. Perhaps like the unclean woman we heard about a few weeks ago, he had spent every dime he had trying to make his son well. And nothing had worked. He was no better off than before.

So, when this father went to Jesus, he didn't go with great confidence. He wasn't like those others who said, "I know you're the one who can help. I know if you just take a look at my boy he will be made well." No, this father, who had watched his son suffer his entire life, powerless to help him, went to Jesus asking, "Is there anything you can do? I don't suppose you might be able help us out." This is not the boldness of faith. This is the desperation of a father who has tried everything. This is the father whose hopes have been crushed so many times that he is not willing to risk having hope at all.

And Jesus gets a little irritated with him. The man says, "If you can help, have some compassion." And Jesus fires back, "IF? IF I can help?" Just who does this guy think he's talking to? He's talking to the only one who *can* help, and he starts with "If". Big mistake. The father realizes his mistakes instantly and utters one of the most stunning phrases in the New Testament. "I believe. Help my unbelief." A strangely powerful confession of faith.

About five years ago a group of folks got together to talk about their need for a new worshiping community. For a variety of reasons, these people of faith had found themselves without a faith home. And out of those conversations, out of those prayers, out of those hopes, out of those frustrations, out of those dreams Faith Lutheran Church was born. What a remarkable confession

of faith it is to start a church from scratch these days. There are countless reasons not to do it and really only one good reason to do it. That good reason is the conviction that the Gospel is God's life-giving Word, and it must be preached. It must be heard. And Faith Lutheran Church was built on that belief. On that simple faith.

But as we know, that is actually no simple thing. Faith that burns brightly one day is dim and fading another day. Faith that carries us one day seems strange and foreign and unreasonable another day. Faith that gives us total confidence one day is hardly remembered another day. This world and our own sin wage a constant battle against the faith that drove the formation of this church.

It's easy to get discouraged. To see only what is lacking. To look out into the future with fear, rather than hope. In the life of the church, any church, it is easy to imagine that everything depends entirely on us and our efforts. Everything depends on our plans, our strategies, our initiatives. Like the disciples we imagine we can give Jesus a little break and take care of things ourselves. And we are all too quickly confronted with our limits. It's easy to forget that this is Christ's church. And the one who has begun a good work among you is not nearly done. He holds your future in his hands.

The prayer and confession that I hope you will remember this day is the prayer and confession of that father 2000 years ago. "I believe. Help my unbelief." When doubt creeps in and causes you to wonder whether any of this could be true you pray, "I believe. Help my unbelief." When despair comes over you, hiding God's presence in your life you pray, "I believe. Help my unbelief." When you can't see clearly the path forward you pray, "I believe. Help my unbelief." When everyone around you tries to convince you you're on the wrong path you pray, "I believe. Help my unbelief." No matter where your life takes you, this is your constant prayer, just as it is the constant prayer of countless others.

And Christ's promise to you today is that the faith he planted in you when the waters of baptism poured over your head, the faith that drove you to form this church, the faith that unites you with the whole Christian church on earth, is a true faith, a living faith, an enduring faith. And that

faith, which has been nurtured by the Holy Spirit, is the faith that allows you to declare, “I believe.” And because of Jesus’ commitment to you, because of his determination to bring you safely home, because he has made promises to you, promises he will never break, he even helps you in your unbelief. He will carry you in the midst of doubt. He will comfort you when you are in despair. He will shine his light into your darkness. He will keep your feet on his path.

“I believe. Help my unbelief.” There is no prayer more faith-filled than that one. It is a prayer that rises to the only one who actually can help us. And it’s precisely in the midst of our unbelief, in the midst of our uncertainty, in the midst of our fear and doubt, that we come to know the profound love and mercy of the one who came to save us. Because of *his* faithfulness, because of his never-failing love, because of his enduring compassion, because of his boundless mercy, you can live in confidence that he is answering that prayer before you even think to offer it. Your unbelief is no match for Christ’s commitment to save you. Your uncertainty is no match for the plans he has for you. Your fear is no match for his power.

You are in his hands. Faith Lutheran Church is in his hands. And there is simply no better place to be in all of creation.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.