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Pentecost 19

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Struggles of Faith; Worthy in Christ”

Text: Luke 17:1-10; Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; 2 Timothy 1:1-14

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Life is hard. That's what makes faith hard. If life were easy, faith would be easy. For it's easy to believe that God is taking care of you and keeping His promises when life is good. But add a little discomfort, throw in a bit of trouble, stir some worry and fear into your life, and all of a sudden it's not so easy.

That is why our good works and acts of love and mercy fail. These flow from faith, and so when life is hard and you're struggling with your faith, you struggle with these as well. For if you're not sure God will provide for you, how will you provide for others? And if it seems that God is not taking care of you, then *you* will try to take care of *you*, and not others.

The readings that we heard today spoke of these struggles. They are not new to us. Christians of every age have experienced them because satan has been at work in every age, attacking faith and trying to tear down the Church of God. And he will not stop with you. If there is a lull, it's only because he is reloading.

And so we heard from the prophet Habakkuk today that there was destruction and violence, strife and contention all around him, the law was paralyzed, and the wicked seemed to greatly outnumber the righteous. And God didn't seem to hear, or care. **“How long shall I cry for help,”** he says, **“and you will not hear?”** Many are asking the same question today, as we look around and see war and persecution, the legalization of sin, and declining numbers in churches. And maybe you wonder, *How long, O Lord, how long?*

And then we heard from St. Paul in his letter to Timothy of suffering and shame. Paul was in prison for preaching the Gospel, and Christians living in an unchristian culture were experiencing discrimination, ridicule, and persecution, leading them to doubt and shame. For if your God is so powerful, why does He let this happen to you? If your God is so great, why is one of your chief apostles in prison? If your God is so good, why isn't He being good to you? You Christians are fools! That's spoken today, too, isn't it? Maybe to you.

And in the Holy Gospel today Jesus speaks of the greatest struggle of faith, when He speaks of forgiveness. Because you will be sinned against - count on it! So, Jesus says, ***“If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.”*** “We like rebuking sin; we’re not so quick to forgive. And seven times in one day? That just means he wasn’t really sorry the first six times, doesn’t it? That just means she’s probably not sorry this time either! So do I really have to forgive?

Why is forgiveness so hard? Perhaps because it is so personal. Yeah, life is hard, but it’s hard for lots of people. And it’s easy to forgive in general. But a sin against *you* - when you’re wronged, when you’re stabbed in the back, when you’re singled out, when you’re tossed aside, and then *repeatedly?! - that’s not so easy, is it?* We don’t want to be so free with our forgiveness. We want people to *say it like they mean it; or show me that you’re really sorry; or we want them to make up for it somehow and so earn my forgiveness.*

That’s why Jesus prefaces these words on forgiveness with ***“Pay attention to yourselves!”*** or perhaps better, ***“Beware of yourselves!”*** He knows this is how we are by nature; that this is our natural inclination; that this is how we so often cause others to stumble. For when we harden our hearts toward them, do we not cause them to harden their hearts toward us? And in hardening their hearts toward us as Christians, then also toward God?

No wonder the apostles, no doubt speaking on behalf of the whole crowd of disciples, then said: ***“Increase our faith!”*** You must really need a strong faith to do that! To believe and do good in the midst of all these difficulties and struggles and sins!

To which Jesus responds: No. A strong faith isn’t bad, but even ***“If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”*** And now you’re probably thinking to yourself: Great! I haven’t made any mulberry trees fly into the sea lately, so my faith must not even be that big! I am a most unworthy servant, struggling to do even the least of what I have been commanded. *What kind of Christian am I?*

What kind of Christian are you? *The perfect kind.* Not that it’s okay to sin. It’s not. But when you despair of yourself and what you can do and how strong you are, you’re perfect, because then repenting of yourself, your righteousness comes from the Righteous One. From the One who came to serve and save sinners, because we cannot do it ourselves. And we will never be able to do it ourselves.

And so Habakkuk, when confronted with sin and despair, takes his place *where?*

On a tower, on a watchpost, not to look at himself or what is happening around him, but to watch for the *Lord* will do. To watch for the *Lord's* work and help. To watch for the *Lord's* answer. The answer that will ***await its appointed time***, but ***will surely come***.

And it did surely come, when the Son of God answered our sin by coming and joining us in it. And coming not as a cheerleader or drill sergeant, but as a substitute, a servant, a sin-bearer. And, as St. Paul assured Timothy, because He did, it is ***He who saved us***, not what we do. It is He who ***brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel***. It is He who gave us His Spirit, ***a deposit*** of the life that is to come.

And Jesus did that by taking your millstone around His neck and being swallowed in the sea of your sins on the cross. And the water that you're drowned in now is not a sea of sin, but the water of life, the water of baptism, that you may live and not die; that your sin be forgiven; that you live by the Spirit now given to you.

But even more Jesus does for you. For He is even greater than the Master who girds himself to serve his servants - He is the almighty God who has girded Himself in human flesh, to serve His creatures. To feed us with His own Body and Blood, that given life in the water of baptism, you also be fed and strengthened in that life of forgiveness and faith by His own gracious hand. And so it is today. You have come in from the fields, from your work and labor, weary and tired. And your Master does not demand service, but bids you sit and rest, that He may serve and refresh you. That you may have life. That you may not die.

And this He does. Because Jesus is the worthy servant. The *only* worthy servant. The one who serves you not because of who you are, but because of who He is. The righteous one come that you may be righteous. Serving you perfectly with exactly what you need: with His forgiveness, His Spirit, and His life. To give you the strength and faith and love that you need to live in this difficult and sinful world. That you be not ashamed or afraid, but a ***righteous one who lives by his faith***.

And living by faith - with our eyes focused not on ourselves, but on Christ and His cross - you will forgive and love and serve, not because of others, because of who they are, because they deserve it. For they surely don't, just as you surely don't. But you will love and serve and forgive because of who you are now, as Christ and his Spirit live in you. As you live with His life. The unworthy made worthy, the unrighteous made righteous, the dead made alive.

And this is true even when your faith is struggling and weak and seems very small - as small as a mustard seed. For the power is not in the strength of your faith, but in the strength of the one your faith is in - the one who gave you your faith. Because

He is strong, you are strong. Because He lives, you live. And because you are His, He is yours. Your light in the darkness, your strength in weakness, your patience in trials, your hope in hopelessness.

So whoever the Lord has given you to forgive, forgive. Whoever He has given you to serve, serve; and to love, love. Why? Because they need it. Because you need it. Because *in* you and *through* you your Saviour is working. Will there be suffering in that? Yeah, maybe. Probably. But He who knows your suffering will care for you through it. He is faithful, and He will bless. For just as the cross He bore was to bless, so is the cross He gives to you.

So fear not, dear ones. Your Saviour lives! He lives **for you**. And as He came, so He will come again, and so He comes even now. So come and receive His service, and go and serve others. Not because you have to do more, but because in Christ, you can do no less.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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