

“Saved by faith alone” Mark 1:4-11

John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

Our readings for today have led me to reflect on something that is of the highest importance for us. That is a teaching that we Lutherans consider to be the very heart of God’s message. Our Reformation fathers believed that the Church stands or falls together with this teaching.

Where this teaching is taught properly, the church will stand firm. Where it is lost or obscured, the church will struggle. The teaching that I am referring to is what we all would recognize from the phrase “saved by faith alone”.

What does this mean ‘saved by faith alone’? It means that the most important things in our lives, that is, – the forgiveness of all our sins, restored relationships with true God and eternal life in His presence, we receive as undeserved and unmerited gifts of our gracious God.

Because of His grace God chooses to give these gifts to us, and they don’t depend on our goodness, they are pure gifts of our loving God. How do we receive these gifts? We receive them by faith alone, that is trusting in His promises, that our God does what He says.

Once more. God chooses to give these gifts because of His grace alone. He doesn’t have to, and we don’t deserve them, that is only His grace that acts. “By grace alone”. And we receive these gifts not by doing something, not because we have fulfilled some conditions, but by faith alone, when we trust our God.

We need to get this right. “By faith alone” excludes all other alternatives. What are they? We could say that the opposite would be ‘saved by works’. That we’d be saved by something that we have done.

“By faith alone” excludes anything that we could have done. Any merit of ours. It levels all people. No one can boast as being better. All are saved by God’s grace alone. And that excludes also all church activities.

We could say that we *are not* saved simply because we have been baptized, or confirmed. We *are not* saved simply because we have attended many services,

and heard many sermons. We *are not* saved simply because we have received the Sacrament or read the Bible from cover till cover. All these are good and needed things. Essential for all Christians. All these God uses to give us His gifts. But we are not saved by simply doing something that He has commanded, for we are saved ... by faith alone. By faith alone!

But what is this faith, that it is so important? This faith, too, is God's gift. It is God's work in us. We can say that this true faith is our union with the Triune God by means of His Holy Spirit. It is God's Spirit dwelling with us and in us.

He comes to us, when we listen to the Word, He dwells with us, He creates this mysterious union, and He establishes this intimate and living bond of the Spirit which connects us with Him and with all His saints. True faith is by no means simply some intellectual knowledge, it is so much more.

When the Holy Spirit comes to us and creates true faith, there are a few things that He does. He convicts us of our sin. That's right. He helps us to realize our sinfulness, not only separate sins that we have done, but our sinful condition, where we are indifferent and rebellious to our loving Creator.

He convicts us of our sin and we begin to realize clearer and clearer that there is nothing that we can offer to our God. There is nothing good in us. And therefore, there is nothing He owes us, nothing that we could demand from Him, or His Church.

That we all are, indeed, beggars before our Lord, and this is how we are to approach Him. Humbly, with repentant hearts and with empty hands, relying on His divine mercy alone, and not on anything in us. With no ambitions.

Then the Holy Spirit leads us to Jesus. We begin to desire His forgiveness more and more. The more we realise our sinfulness, the more we thirst to hear the words of forgiveness, the more joy they bring.

The more we thirst for Jesus, the more grateful we become when He comes and blesses us so abundantly. When He comes to us and speaks His forgiveness in the Absolution, when He speaks His love in the sermon, and when He feeds us with this Holy Sacrament.

This is where God creates, strengthens and sustains our faith, this living and life-giving bond of the Spirit, right here, in the community of His people, where we humbly gather to receive His gifts, and where He Himself teaches and blesses us with His Word and Spirit.

Then, filled with His gifts, we rejoice and cannot help but strive to please Him. The Holy Spirit then teaches us everything that Jesus has commanded and enables us to strive to live a holy life according to God's Commandments.

And we do it with joy and excitement, we want to support our congregation, and we want everyone to learn about this gracious God. This is what true and living faith looks like. This is how we can recognize it.

But it doesn't mean that we will always long to be with Jesus, that we will always long to hear God's Word and to give generously to support the preaching and teaching of Good News.

Our old self will always fight against God, and we will need to discipline ourselves, and to commit to be obedient to Jesus, and to pray for the help of the Holy Spirit, and we will need to support one another. That's what true faith does, it holds fast to Jesus, despite of what our sinful flesh may crave for.

Our faith is like a hand that holds to our Saviour's hand. It may be hard to hold to Jesus. Our sins may drag us down, our old self will prefer to serve ourselves, instead of serving Jesus, but as long, as we try to hold to Jesus, He will never let us go. It doesn't matter how weak we are, for He has all the strength needed.

This much about the true faith. Now, did you know, that statistically more than half of people in Tanunda are Lutherans? Many of them are baptized and confirmed. Many will say that they have their own faith. Their own faith...

But there is no repentance. There is no desire to receive God's forgiveness and to be with Him where He invites us. There is no desire to be with brothers and sisters in Christ, supporting one another and supporting the proclamation of the Gospel with their time and with their possessions.

Instead there is rejection of Jesus and indifference to His Body, the Church. It goes like: 'We don't need Jesus or the Church to be good Christians...' It that's a case, it doesn't matter how great is someone's self-confidence that they have their own faith.

We are not saved by our own faith. Regardless how strong it may be. We are saved by the true faith, that is God's work and God's gift, created when we listen to our God and when He sends His Spirit into our hearts. No listening to God, no receiving of His Spirit, no true and saving faith...

If we understand this well, it helps us to be better messengers of Jesus. There are people who have their own faith. Sure. There are people who have gone to Christian schools, who even have been baptized, and done their confirmation.

But if they have turned their back to the Lord, if they don't listen to His life-giving voice and don't receive His Spirit, we can't simply say: "They are fine, they have their own faith."

No! We need to realise that they are not fine. They need to hear God's message. That they need to hear the call to repentance and the Good News about Jesus, as much as anyone else. Even if they often are much more resistant than those who have never heard the Gospel.

If we assume that such people are already saved, by having some loose connections to the church, we only do harm to them. Then we may confirm them in their indifference and ignorance, then we may lead them into false security that they can be great Christians without Jesus, without listening to God's Word, without receiving His Spirit, without being a part of Christ's body. We would simply help them to remain in darkness and slavery to sin and death.

We all are saved by faith alone. Not by works. Not even by doing church things. We can have this picture, where on the one hand, God offers and gives us His gifts in many ways. On the other hand, we can receive His gifts only in faith. Faith is the empty hand with which we receive God's gifts.

God is faithful, and He gives His gifts as and where He has promised, but unless we receive them with the hand of faith, we don't receive them at all. God truly forgives us our sins in the Absolution.

But if someone thinks that they do something for God by 'going to church', they simply don't receive God's forgiveness. It can be received only with the hand of faith, trusting that God does what He says.

In the Holy Communion Jesus serves us His life-giving body and blood with bread and wine, but unless we receive it in faith, with repentant hearts, trusting that we receive forgiveness and eternal life, then instead of God's blessings we may receive His judgement, that may lead to sickness and even death, as Paul the apostle explains it.

In the Holy Baptism, God offers to make us members of His Church, but if someone does it to please their family, or believing that thus they will secure some good things, some lucky charms from God, and don't have any intention to be members of God's Church, then it doesn't do much good to them, for they haven't received it by faith.

If someone only does the motions, but doesn't receive God's gifts by faith, with repentant hearts, fearing God's wrath and longing for His forgiveness, then such a person not only doesn't receive God's gifts, but it can be even worse.

If we endorse such mechanical motions as good enough, then such people may grow confident in their false beliefs, and they may harden their hearts even more, and they will need Jesus even less. "I have done the thing and I'm okay."

Of course, it is first and foremost the responsibility of pastors, to do their best so that people would receive God's gifts according to God's own instructions and would receive them for their benefit.

And I can tell you that this is one thing that worries me greatly. But it is not pastors' responsibility only. We are all to care that people receive God's gifts by faith and for their blessing. We are not here to please people.

We are here to do our best to ensure that everyone receives all the precious gifts of our God in faith, and according to God's own instructions. For all these are His gifts, and not ours.

We all need to care for people and protect them from false impressions that they can be saved by simply following some church's traditions. And if we will uphold the teaching about 'saved by faith alone', our church will stand firm.

Remember, we are saved by faith alone. And this faith is God's work and God's gift to us. And that is God's grace alone that grants us His Spirit and this faith. And only true faith enables us to receive God's abundant gifts.

Only by faith we can receive God's gifts given in baptism. Only by faith we can receive God's gifts given in Absolution. Only by faith we can receive God's gifts given in the Sacrament. Only by faith we can receive God's gifts given to us in the Word, and in the Divine Service. Only by faith.

How grateful we need to be for this faith! How careful we need to be to keep and nourish it, and how afraid to reject God's Spirit. How blessed we are that every week we are invited in His presence, right here. That every week our Lord speaks to us and sends His Spirit into our hearts to create and sustain this living bond that we call true and saving faith.

And as we listen to our Lord, and as He send His Spirit to us, we can be sure that the Father looks at you the same way He looked at Jesus: "You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased."

Amen.