

*Someone from the crowd answered him, 'Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.' He answered them, 'You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.' And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it threw the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, 'How long has this been happening to him?' And he said, 'From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.' Jesus said to him, 'If you are able! - All things can be done for the one who believes.' Immediately the father of the child cried out, 'I believe; help my unbelief!' When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, 'You spirit that keep this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!' After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, 'He is dead.' But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand.*

Dear Lord, send your Holy Spirit to open our ears and hearts to understand your word

Dear Congregation °

A long time ago, I went to a cabaret. A scene amused me, but also made me think. The scene plays in a lost & found office. But it is a very special lost & found office, one for the lost faith. An elderly woman is visiting the office and complaining that she lost her faith. Had it been found somewhere? The official in the lost & found office asked her: What was that faith like? How can you describe your faith? Evangelical or Catholic or something else? It unfolds, going back and forth, with all sorts of funny twists. No, the poor woman could not describe her lost faith. But she

missed it so much! It was like a communion to the sick and meant comfort to her, and now she did not know what might take its place. Was there a replacement? Could she acquire the faith somewhere like buying groceries? But over time, it became more like relief: she had not lost her faith, she had simply given it no attention anymore, and had only noticed what faith meant to her when she began to miss it.

I had to think of this bizarre scene when I saw the sentences that speak in our gospel reading of faith: "You faithless generation", laments Jesus first, and then he says, "Everything is possible to him who believes." The climax is, however, the desperate exclamation of the father: "I believe; help my unbelief!" All facets which relate to faith are addressed here. From unbelief and doubt to the insurmountable strength of faith.

The women had not used her faith and therefore lost the faith. Faith is a bit like a muscle: it grows strong with usage but degenerates when not used. The measure of faith given (Romans 12:3) grows when used.

Faith is something strange. You can lose it and find it, but it is certainly not a thing, you could own or possess like other things. I'm always called to make a decision, but I cannot make the decision that I believe. Faith, as the reformers, especially Martin recognized, is a gift, a talent. Through faith, I understand the devotion of God, his Yes to me, which in Jesus Christ gladdens me with nothing but grace. Yes: through faith, this delight, this gladdening of my heart becomes effective in my life. Luther points this out too and says: "By faith alone." *Sola fide*. This is, in fact, so important to him that, in his translation of the Bible, he writes the word "alone" in a place where it is not written in the original text.

We read now in the Epistle to the Romans (3,28): "We now regard man to become righteous without the law, by faith alone."

Luther has been censoriously criticized for this. But he says, the word "alone" may be linguistically wrong, but from the point of view of content, it is sensible and necessary. For through faith alone - that was Luther's firm conviction - only by faith do I accept God, accept God's "No" to my sins, and I accept God's "Yes" to me as a sinner. Why can I do this? Because I trust in God with all my heart. Faith is trust, faith is a heart affair. He makes me whole. Once again Luther writes: "*Fides facit personam*", faith makes the person, shapes and determines him / her completely.

However, a heart affair cannot just be turned on or off like the electric light. But I can fill this heart affair with life: be reliable, trustworthy, I can celebrate it with others, translate and give it a meaning and invite others to be open for it. But we know that it is very special with heart affairs, just as with trust and with faith also.

I cannot easily make it, I cannot persuade myself, I cannot even decide myself. I can only let it be given to me, as a gift, to be accepted and passed on.

There will be no safety or guarantees. Faith is dangerous. Faith is a total risk. I risk my life, my plans, my own powers, and give my life out of my own hands. I put it in the hands of God. Completely. All I am, I owe to him.

Yes, dear congregation

But the important point is, that biblically, faith is never perfect, meaning that our initial faith in Christ - or trust, surrender, submission, commitment - whatever word one uses, is never perfect, nor can it be. However, the smallest amount of genuine faith or trust or commitment is fully sufficient to save us. God desires that we grow in faith and not remain at the level of faith we began with. So, God tests our faith so that we may test His faithfulness. There are moments in our lives that our faith is so weak because of the pressures we face. (John Ankerberg).

Dear Congregation

What do you suppose it would be like, to have to witness that your child suffers from demon possession? The thought itself is chilling, isn't

it? The demon periodically throws your child into the fire, trying to burn him to death. It throws him into the water, trying to drown him. Of course, destruction, death, is the goal!

Your son or daughter rolls around on the ground and foams at the mouth. The demon has taken away his ability to hear and to speak. You awaken each day wondering what the day will be like. Despite all your previous disappointments, your hope remains because you are a child of God by grace.

Not only are you His by grace, your child is His by grace too. Though God seems to have forgotten His child, your child, you continue to believe that He has loved him unto death, even death on the cross.

That is, after all, what the Gospel is all about! God, in Christ, takes on our suffering and death that we might have life in His name. "*No greater love has any man than this...that He lay down His life for His friends.*" (John 15)

You continue to believe, that He loves you and your child and, as the psalmist says, "*that you will yet see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.*"

There are those other days though, those days when you wonder if you can go on, when you wonder if God is punishing you or if He is punishing your child for something one of you did or didn't do, or if he has turned His back on you altogether. In those days, from the very depths of your soul, you cry out once again with the psalmist. "*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide Your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?*"

No doubt the man in this morning's Gospel reading, vacillated between confidence and joy in God's grace and mercy, on the one hand, and moments of fear and near despair, on the other. When he had the opportunity, he cried out to Jesus, "*If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.*" Jesus, as always, heard the cry of His child and said, "*All things are possible to him who believes.*"

"All things are possible to him who believes." Heaven forbid that God's grace should depend on us. It would seem though, that this is exactly what Jesus was saying to this distraught father. The man asked for Jesus' help and Jesus said, "believe!"

However, who believes so fully in God's goodness that he can produce miracles, even the casting out of demons? After all, the disciples couldn't cast this demon out. Remember, elsewhere Jesus said, "*if you have faith as a mustard seed you can say to a mountain 'fall into the sea' and it will do it*"

Yet, neither Paul, nor Peter, nor Augustine, nor Luther, nor any other person that we would consider a giant of faith, ever caused a mountain to fall into the heart of the sea. And none of us have ever caused such a miracle either!

The man answered Jesus, "I do believe; but help my unbelief." That, dear congregation, is the confession and plea of a repentant child of God, who struggles with the inconsistencies of faith and unbelief. It is the confession and plea of the baptized, who rejoice in the gifts God gives, who face life rooted and grounded in the word and promises of God. It is the confession and plea of the one who bears events and suffers realities in life, that defy everything he believes.

And yet, even when the world is quiet, when life is good, when things are as they should be, that is, when life is fair, just and right, it is also the confession and plea of the child of God who is torn by his old nature, that part of him that doesn't want to believe God, that doesn't have the power to trust God and that doesn't want what God gives. "I do believe (the man said); help my unbelief."

I imagine you have cried out to God in the same way once or twice. I know I have. As frustrating as it may be, the fact is none of us ever does anything perfectly. We don't repent and confess our sins perfectly. We don't sing God's praise perfectly. And we certainly don't believe perfectly. For that reason, we are thankful that we can confess with a grieving

father "*I do believe; help my unbelief,*" knowing that God is good and that He will continually bear with us when we wrestle to put away our unbelief.

Someone once said, "the depths of our misery can never fall below the depths of God's mercy." The Scripture says the same thing but in different words. "*No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, He will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation He will also provide the way of escape.*" (1 Cor 10)

*"I believe; help my unbelief."* Such is the cry of the righteous. And God's response is always the same. Rest in My blood, bought gift of forgiveness! "I have loved you unto death, even death on a cross."

God says yes to you only in Jesus Christ, in nothing but Jesus Christ, and he says it without any presupposition, without any pre-eminence, without any condition, that is, out of love, thus only from grace. To trust in this divine "yes", to trust with all my heart, I could also say, only from the heart, to affirm with body and soul, in life as in death, that is faith. Faith is what God is doing in your life.

Whoever experiences this - is free. He no longer must hold on to a spasm, his hand twisted to a fist, he is no longer driven by his own anxiety, he is freed from the compulsion to make himself something special. I can dispense of making others guilty, accusing the refugees, the strangers, or myself. Whoever believes, is free of all of this. Free. By grace alone. The hand, curled to the fist, opens. Under the cross, your heart is resting on roses. This is what Luther wanted to show in his coat of arms, the "Luther Rose". This is the gospel he rediscovered. It lets us breathe, drowns fear, gives new life, frees us, opens our eyes to the distress of others, and drives away all mourning spirits.

Amen

The peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.