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Immanuel Lutheran Church – Burns, WY

Advent I – Midweek (dual parish service with St. John’s, Kimball, NE)

November 30, 2016 Biblical Virtue: Faith

Text: Jude 1–4, 20–25; Hebrews 11:1–6, 32–40

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

“No now faith, hope, and love abide these three; but the greatest of these is love” (I Corinthians 13:13).

Traditionally, there are seven virtues. Four are called the cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance. These virtues have long been extolled and praised since ancient times. In fact, it was Plato and Aristotle, the two greatest Greek philosophers, who defined and exemplified the cardinal virtues. The early Church Fathers incorporated the four virtues into their teaching on how Christians should live their day to day lives in the world. It is a good and noble thing to live a life of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance.

But when it comes to life in the Church, the pride of place as always been given to the three theological virtues listed in I Corinthians 13:13: faith, hope, and love. Whereas the righteous pagans can live a virtuous life of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance, such a good life will not lead to eternal life. The three theological virtues, by contrast, are the path of righteousness before God. Only Christians, those redeemed by the Lord Jesus Christ, can live a life of faith, hope, and love. Tonight, we consider the virtue of faith.

In the Holy Scriptures, the word faith is used in two different ways. The first “refers to the objective content of Christian doctrine; that is, the absolute truths of Scripture that are believed, confessed, and taught” (Curtis Giese, p. 245). This is the faith which is believed (*fides quae creditor*). For example, the doctrine of the Virgin Birth is part of the Christian faith; that is, it is an essential part of the content of Christian teaching that must be believed, confessed, and taught. A group or an organization or a denomination cannot deny the teaching of the Holy Trinity, the Incarnation of God’s Son, the Virgin Birth, the death and resurrection of Jesus for the salvation of sinners, etc and still be called Christian; such groups are no longer part of the Christian faith.

The objective use of the word faith is found in Jude 3, “Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you to contend for the faith once delivered to the saints.” And then again in vs. 20, “But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit.” Jude is admonishing these early Christians to hold to true doctrine, to build themselves up upon this objective faith as received from Holy Scripture.

Jude’s admonition comes as a result of “ungodly people who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” (vs. 4). The doctrine, the faith was being corrupted, so much so that it was leading people to deny Jesus! Eternal souls were at stake!

Notice too that this faith, this content of doctrine and teaching has been “once delivered to the saints.” The Christian faith is complete and whole; it cannot be altered, changed, or added to. With the coming of Jesus, the content of faith is settled. It doesn’t grow to fit the times; the Christian faith is not some wax nose that can be shaped into anything on a whim. Without this pure, unaltered faith once delivered to the saints, there can be no salvation, no forgiveness, no hope of the resurrection unto eternal glory with God.

This is why we pray so fervently to God for true doctrine to remain among us. The Small Catechism’s explanation to the 6th Petition, “And lead us not into temptation” teaches us that we are constantly asking God “to guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature many not deceive us and mislead us into false belief...” False doctrine leads to false belief.

And that takes us to the second, and most common use of the word faith. This usage refers to the subjective faith of the individual person by which the Lord Jesus is believed and trusted unto forgiveness, life, and salvation (*fides qua creditor*). This kind of faith – personal faith in Jesus – is built upon the objective content of Christian doctrine. Without pure teaching, there can be no personal faith unto salvation. For faith always has an object to which it believes and trusts.

The writer to the Hebrews defines this kind of subjective faith in 11:1, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” And then in vs. 6, “And without faith it is impossible to please (God), for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (11:6). Saving “faith does not mean believing what you know is not true, nor does it mean trusting in that which is irrational or illogical. It means, rather, believing what you cannot see with

your physical eyes and trusting in promises given by an authority in whom you have confidence” (Louis Markos, p. 115).

Faith is absolute assurance of things promised and hoped for but not seen or experienced with our physical senses. Faith is conviction that things unseen are true nonetheless. What stands behind this absolute faith and trust is God Himself as He is revealed to us in Holy Scripture.

Saving faith is a gift of God the Father created within us by the working of the Holy Spirit through the Lord’s Gospel. This faith receives the forgiveness of sins, believes we are born anew of God, hinders our sinful flesh, and allows truth and virtue to flourish. The writer to the Hebrew Christian goes to great lengths to extol this majestic virtue in God’s people. Through faith, God’s holy people conquered kingdoms, stopped the mouths of lions, received the dead back to life. Through faith, some were tortured, suffered mocking, and endured imprisonment so that they might receive a better resurrection promised by Christ Jesus on the Last Day.

Martin Luther, in his preface to the book of Romans, follows a similar pattern of praise heaped upon the virtue of faith created in us by the Holy Spirit,

“O, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them... Faith is a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge of and confidence in God’s grace makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and all creatures. And this is the work that the Holy Spirit performs in faith” (cited from *Treasury of Daily Prayer* p. 961-962).

Prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance are noble and commendable virtues which we should pursue and cultivate. The theological virtue of faith, however, leads all believers on an even nobler path that endures to eternity. Through faith “we will bless our Lord from this time forth and forevermore” (Psalm 115:18). The Lord continue to strengthen and enrich your faith ...

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.