

Sermon for the Seventh Sunday after Trinity; Mark 8:1-9

[JESUS FEEDS THE FOUR THOUSAND WITH SEVEN LOAVES AND A FEW SMALL FISH]

A Sermon by Martin Luther; Taken from His Church Postil, 1523

Part I. Concerning Faith

1. Beloved friends, I hope you thoroughly understand this Gospel; for you are now sufficiently established in the truth to know what we should expect in the Gospel and what is presented to us there, namely, the true nature and life of faith. Because of this Christ is pictured and represented so lovingly in all the Gospel lessons. Although his history and works are ever changing, yet the plain, simple faith remains the same. Today's Gospel paints to us the Lord in a way that we may fully know how we should esteem him, namely, that he is merciful, meek and loving; that he gladly helps everybody and freely associates and deals with all people. And such a picture as this faith really craves.

2. Therefore the Scriptures present to us a double picture; one is that of fear or the overpowering picture of the severe wrath of God, before which no one can stand, but must despair unless has faith. In contrast with this the picture of grace is presented to us in order that faith may behold it and obtain for itself an agreeable and comforting refuge in God, with the hope that man cannot expect so much from God, that there is not still much more to be had from him.

3. You have often heard that there are also two kinds of possessions, spiritual and temporal. Today's Gospel treats of the temporal and bodily blessings, teaches us the faith of the child, and it is a picture for the weak, in that they should look to God for everything good and that they might thus later learn to trust God and depend upon him for spiritual blessings. For if we are instructed in the Gospel how Christ feeds our stomachs, we can then conclude that he will also feed and clothe our souls. For if I cannot trust him to sustain my body, much less can I trust him to sustain my soul forever. For example, if I cannot trust a person that he will give me one dollar, how can I trust him that he will give me ten? If I cannot expect from a person that he will give me a piece of bread; much less could I have any hope that he would give me a house and yard, and the whole earth.

4. Now, he who cannot, like the babe on its mother's breast, have a child faith, will hardly hope that God will forgive him his sins and save his soul forever; for the soul is inexpressibly more than the stomach, for which also Christ has compassion as the Gospel today proves. Therefore St. Peter said correctly in 1 Pet. 2:1-3: "Beloved brethren: Putting away therefore all wickedness, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, long for the spiritual milk which is without guile, that ye may grow thereby unto Salvation; if ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious." For it is not enough that a babe should imbibe milk, but it must also grow large and strong, that it may learn later to eat bread and hard food.

5. But "to feed on milk" means, to taste the favor and the kind grace of God. "To taste the goodness of God" means, to experience it in ones life. For should I preach a hundred years of God, how kind, sweet and good he is, that he condescends to help man, and I have not yet myself tasted it through experience; thus all is still in vain and no one is in this way taught to trust God rightly. From this you can conclude what a rare person a

true Christian is. For there are many who say they trust In God for their daily bread; but that floats only upon the tongue and hangs in the ears; it never enters the heart where it belongs.

6. Now let us observe in this example, what the life and nature of faith are. The apostle in the Epistle to the Hebrews, 11:1, writes thus: "Now faith is assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things not seen." That is as much as to say, faith is the means by which one trusts in possessions he does not see, namely, that I should expect temporal things which I can neither see nor hear, but I must only hope for them; as in the case in today's Gospel. There were many people together, about four thousand, who with their wives and children had had nothing to eat for the space of three days (I judge that can be called fasting), but were extremely hungry, far from home, without any provisions on which the body lives. Now the, apostle says, faith is that through which I hope for things I cannot see. Such a faith the great multitude of people here has; they see no food and yet they hope that God will nourish them.

7. Now, what does Christ do in this case? What attitude does he take to this transaction? He must not have had much tact for he goes to the disciples and asks, how shall one feed all these? They reply, Oh, who will be able to feed such a great multitude of people with bread in the wilderness? But here you see how little human thoughts and faith harmonize; here you see, the wiser reason is, the less it accomplishes in the works of God. Therefore Christ asked his disciples that everyone might learn to know by experience what reason is, and acknowledge how reason and faith in no way agree. Here we learn to blindfold reason, when we begin to believe, and then give reason a permanent furlough.

8. Take an example: If I were a man who had a wife and children, and had nothing for them and no one gave me anything; then I should believe and hope that God would sustain me. But if I see that it amounts to nothing and I am not helped with food and clothing, what takes place? Then, as an unbelieving fool, I begin to doubt, and go and take whatever is at hand, steal, deceive, cheat the people and make my way the best I can and may. See this is what shameless unbelief does. But if I am a believer then I close my eyes and say: O God, I am thy creature and thy handiwork and thou hast from the beginning created me. I will depend entirely upon you who cares more for me, how I shall be sustained, than I do myself; thou wilt indeed nourish me, feed, clothe and help me, where and when you know best.

9. Thus, faith is a sure foundation, through which I expect that which I see not. Therefore, faith must always have sufficient, for before it should fail the angels would have to come from heaven and dig bread out of the earth in order that believing persons should be fed. Yes, the heavens and the earth would have to pass away before God would let his believers lack clothing and the other necessities of life. The comforting and powerful Word of the divine promise requires and demands this. David boasts of this in Psalm 37:25: "I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread." And in the verses just preceding in Psalm 37:18-19 he says: "Jehovah knoweth the days of the perfect; and their inheritance shall be forever. They shall not be put to shame in the time of evil; and in the days of famine they shall be satisfied."

10. But when one inquires of reason for counsel it soon says: It is not possible. Yes, you must wait a long time until roasted ducks fly into your mouth, for reason sees nothing, grasps nothing, and nothing is present. Just so the apostles do also here who thought: Yes, who will provide food for so many, no one is able to do that; but had they seen a great pile of money and in addition tables laden with bread and meat, they would soon have discovered good counsel and been able to give good consolation; that would have gone according to their thinking very reasonably. However, since they saw nothing they could find no counsel, but held it to be impossible that one should thus feed so many people, and especially since no provisions were at hand.

11. We have said enough concerning faith through which we entrust the stomach to God for his care, and believe that he will not allow us to come to distress because of the lack of temporal things. Now concerning spiritual blessings, when we are about to die, I wish also to say: then we will find and see before our eyes very death, and yet we would gladly wish to live; then we will see before us very hell, and yet we would gladly wish to possess heaven; then we will see God's judgment, and yet we would gladly see his grace; In brief, we will not see a single one of the things we would like to have. No created thing can help us In the presence of death, hell and the judgment of God; and if I believe I will say: Yes, faith is the fundamental principle by which I secure what I do not see; hence, if I believe, nothing can harm me. Although I see nothing now but death, hell and the judgment of God before my eyes, yet I must not look at them; but fully trust that God, by virtue of the power of his promise, not because of my worthiness, will give me life, salvation and grace. That is cleaving to God by faith in the right way.

12. This is here beautifully painted in the visible picture of the four thousand men who hang on God alone through the faith that says: yes, God will indeed feed us. Had they judged according to reason, they would have said: Oh, we are so many, we are here in the desert, we have empty and hungry stomachs; nothing can help our condition. There was nothing of which they could speak, but they had a good refuge without any human disputing with God, they commended themselves to him and freely laid all their need upon him. Then Christ comes before they have any care and before they ask him to come, and takes all more to heart than they do themselves, and says to his disciples: "I have compassion on the multitude, because they continue with me now three days and have nothing to eat; and if I send them away fasting to their homes, they will faint on the way."

13. Behold, what a sympathetic Christ we have, who even provides food for our poor stomachs. Here new hope is awakened and man is comforted through the words of Christ; as he says: They lie there and wait for me until the third day. I must give them also what they need. Here you see that all who thus faithfully cling to the Word of God will be fed by God himself; for that is the nature and the power of faith, which flows alone out of the Word of God.

14. Therefore, beloved friends, let us once make a beginning to believe; for unbelief is the cause of all sin and vice, which now have taken the upper hand in all stations of life. How does it come to pass that everywhere there are so many foolish women and rogues, so many rank imposters, thieves, robbers, usurers, murderers and sellers of indulgences? It all comes from unbelief. For such men judge alone according to human reason, and the reason judges only according to that which it sees; but what it does not see, it does not wish to lay hold of. Therefore, if it does not place its confidence in God through faith, then it must despair in itself and develop rogues and rascals. Observe, thus it comes to pass wherever men permit their reason to govern them and are not ruled by faith.

Part II. Concerning Love.

15. Now just as you have learned faith, so should we learn love; for Christ, wishes to set before us a twofold picture, namely, a picture of faith, that we should not be over anxious; also a picture of love, that, as he does to us, is anxious about our welfare, feeds us and gives us to drink and clothes us, only out of free love, not for the sake of his own advantage or because of our worthiness; so should we also do good unto our neighbour, freely and gratuitously, out of pure love, by which, as he is a Christ to you, you should thus also be a Christ to your neighbour.

16. Therefore you see that all the works of the priests, monks and nuns are vain and cursed; for they are not directed to the end to serve their neighbours; but only that they may merit much before God through their

works. For true Christian works must be directed entirely and freely to the end that they be done for the good of our neighbour, only freely given and scattered, broadcast among the masses; as Christ also did who cast his good deeds away freely for the people to scramble after, and gave his doctrine, word and life for the Church. Blessed are they who accept this giving with thanksgiving.

17. I say this only for the reason that you may see how all parts of the Gospel lessons tend in the direction and will have nothing more, and God also requires nothing more from us, than that we surrender ourselves to the service of our neighbour, and accordingly sustain him in the name of God and in the place of God, do him good and show him a service; for God does not need our good works as Psalm 50.7-13 says: "Hear, O my people, and I will speak; O Israel, and I will testify unto thee: I am God, even thy God. I will not reprove thee for thy sacrifices; and thy burnt-offerings are continually before me. I will take no bullock out of thy house, nor he goats out of thy folds. For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the mountains; and the wild beasts of the field are mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell thee; for the world is mine, and the fullness thereof. Will I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?"

18. Just so he says to us also; behold, Israel, that is, thou believing one, I am thy God and thou art not my God; I will give to you and not you to me. Hear, Israel, I will not be angry with thee that thou dost not offer me any sacrifices; for what thou hast in thy barn, house and yard, that was all mine before it was thine; for I have stored it away there. Here he spoke very pointedly to the Jews who prided themselves highly on their sacrifices. Now, since he rejects our offering, what will he then have? The Psalmist in the verses immediately following says: "Offer unto God the sacrifice of thanksgiving; and pay thy vows unto the Most High; and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me." That means, I wish to have thy heart, rest thou in me and believe me to be a kind and gracious God, that I am thy God: then you will have enough. Therefore he says also in the following Psalm, 51:14-19: "Deliver me from blood guilt O God, thou God of my salvation; and my tongue shall sing aloud of thy righteousness. O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall show forth thy praise. For thou delightest not in sacrifice; else would I give it: thou has no pleasure in burnt-offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise."

19. In this confidence and hope let thy faith run its course, to acknowledge God as thy friend, to cleave to him in the greatest need, to flee to him, and to no one else. Believe it and expect it, then he will help thee, this thou shouldst not doubt; therefore in harmony with this, thou shouldst serve thy neighbour freely and gratuitously. These two thoughts are presented to us in this Gospel.

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