

*Texts: Second Corinthians 5:1-21; Mark 8:22-26 Living by Faith*

*Theme: Faith Nevertheless*

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost; Sept. 6, 2020, Online; Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV;

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

Theologian Karl Barth is often credited with advice for clergy to preach “with the Bible in one hand, and the newspaper in the other.” I’m mindful that many of us are weary of the news these days. The partisan bickering and harmful rhetoric we hear, the ongoing culture clash, the reality of suffering and disease - we see it every day, and division is something with which we are all well aware. Maybe it’s hard these days to see the good stuff, and we lament more than we rejoice. Maybe we’re unable to see how we will get through a new school year, survive the next round of layoffs, or stick together as a church despite the trouble we all face. Maybe it’s hard for you to see Jesus right now. That happens. It’s normal. It’s okay to not be okay here. Faith doesn’t prevent us from pain, it doesn’t inoculate us from illness or difficulties that come with being human. It doesn’t make us perfect. But the promise from scripture is that faith in Jesus frees us. We are Lutheran Christians. We know we are saved by grace through faith. We know it and we believe it, and we speak it, and we share it, so that even when times are hard, we can trust not in ourselves but in Jesus who is making all things new.

This weekend we also remember Labor day, usually by taking a trip, having a barbeque, a big party, or just taking some time off from our work. Now that we are not gathering in groups, more than ever we are mindful of those who do not have work. Every industry has been hit hard in our city, but especially we think of conventions and entertainers, and our hospitality workers that are facing extended unemployment. The holiday itself of course is a recognition of the lives invested in the Labor movement,

those who gave of themselves so that workers would have safer conditions, better treatment from employers and fair standards. Most of us can't imagine working in a field, a factory, or a mine, but maybe our parents or grandparents shared stories of what that was like. It would certainly be painful at times, with long hours and sacrifices made for the sake of supporting a family. Even in our modern workplaces, even for those of us in careers we love and appreciate, there are times when we need a break, or when we'd rather be somewhere else, but we feel we just have to keep going.

We know from the letters of the Apostle Paul that by trade, he was a tent maker. That's pretty hard labor. It probably was not the most exciting part of his life, but it was what he did to sustain himself while he went throughout the world sharing the good news of Jesus in places that often didn't want to hear it. Eventually, he'd make some friends along the way and often it was women who helped to financially support the new faith communities that Paul helped to organize. But when he came to a new place, he knew he had to work. He knew about tents. He knew that as hard as you'd worked on one, as well made as it was, it couldn't last forever. It might be torn, burned, or broken down. It was a common metaphor for the human body, which reminded me of this story:

There was a young man growing up in Alabama who was a huge football fan. He dreamed to one day play for the Crimson Tide. At the age of 13, he was diagnosed with rheumatic fever, and spent about 6 months confined to his bed, where he listened to radio reports from World War II, as well as Saturday football games. His dreams might have seemed unattainable, and his health was deteriorating. He could have given up. While football was a welcome distraction, he says it was always *faith in God* that kept him going. He recovered, and went on to play quarterback, eventually playing for the

University of Alabama. Today, at age 90, Bobby Bowden is known for being a faithful Christian, a loving father and husband, and one of the most successful college coaches in history. And despite all his success on the football field, he is more concerned with sharing his faith, helping others, and making a difference in the lives of those he meets.

Paul writes about the pain we experience in our bodies and the longing to be free of the human struggle, pointing to the promise we have in Jesus of new life. He writes to sustain this community that is being torn by divisive rhetoric, others preaching a different kind of message, these new Christians are being persecuted and oppressed, and facing conflict from within as well. He knows of their struggles and calls them to have faith nevertheless. He reminds them of the promise to keep them focused on what matters most, and to encourage them to be confident in their faith. We also need to be encouraged in difficult times. We need to know that the struggles we face are real but that they will come to an end. The Word of God has not changed. The Gospel is not a false hope built on making us happy, comfortable, or satisfying our individual desires and preferences, but it is a promise that our world is being made new, that we are loved and not defined by the ways we've failed to live up to our calling as God's people, but that we are chosen and forgiven, and that in the end, we will find relief and healing from the difficulties we face in our lives.

Therefore, we can begin with the end in mind.

If we only live by what we can see, we will see pain, persecution, division, disease, selfishness, isolation, idolatry, greed, and injustice. We will see brokenness and death. The life we live here is characterized by the consequence of our sin, our selfish choices, and our broken reality. Living by faith means that when we feel the

burden of our human frailty and we call on the name of Jesus, we will be made to see again with new eyes. Jesus gives us eyes of faith to see that the promise is still good. And like the story of Jesus healing the blind man, it might not happen all at once - it's a little blurry at first, but eventually, in the end, we are made new - we are made to see with the eyes of faith, not to return to the old ways, to our destructive habits, to our routines of self sabotage, to being victims unable to make a difference, but to see that because we have a Savior, one who has endured the reality of suffering and pain and death and is raised up for us, that we are with Him. He is in us. We can be faithful nevertheless. We walk by faith, and live differently. Craig Koester says that "just as human conflict led to the crucifixion of Jesus, God's message of resurrection is a refusal to let human conflict set the terms for the future." Walking by faith means we are free to live this transformed life here and now.

Already, you are God's new creation. Just like little Jeremiah last week, in baptism, you are claimed and forgiven, freed and called into Christ. How can we know it and we live it here in this world, in this part of the kin-dom? That part doesn't happen all at once. It's a process. Maybe it's a winding road. It begins with hearing the good news - and participating in the cycle of repentance, forgiveness, gathering and sending, giving grace and receiving it, serving those entrusted to our care and those we encounter on the journey, and sharing it everywhere we go. You probably don't need a me to read a newspaper to you to know there are people in desperate need of encouragement and hope, just outside your door.

You are in Christ. You are an ambassador for Christ, one who communicates what this Christ-Centered life is all about. This is the mission we share: to speak the

Gospel of Jesus, to carry our faith into the world, to share it - with our children, in our relationships, through acts of selflessness to our neighbors that are close at hand, and to advocate for change, and to lift the voices of those oppressed everywhere.

In faith we know that whatever struggles we face, Jesus walks with us even and especially when we can't see, and the Holy Spirit lives in us, giving us what we need to persevere. When you know you are saved - when you believe you are freed and forgiven, reconciled to God through the redeeming love of Jesus, you are able to move forward, to live boldly, to serve others with courage, and recognize the blessings that surround you. Even when the world groans, and our bodies fail us, and our relationships are strained, and even if we have to take a step back to step forward, we can have faith nevertheless. We can be assured that there is good stuff yet to come, that Jesus has prepared a place for us, that our lives are not only ours but are for the world and for a reason.

Be gentle with yourselves and with one another. Walk by faith, live by faith, and rejoice - Christ is faithful for us. Amen.