

Sermon Draft

Text: Hebrews 11:17–31 (32–40); 12:1–3

Sermon: “Love and Faith”

In our Gospel Jesus preaches that he brings division on the earth (Luke 12:51); he separates his people from this world, from their own sinful flesh, from the devil and the devil’s preachers. Yet, as the Old Testament Reading illustrates, the enemies of God’s kingdom are ever trying to seduce the faithful away from true faith in his promises. False prophets go out and prophesy falsely and *“prophesy the deceit of their own heart”* (Jeremiah 23:21, 26). Even our friends and family can tempt us to unbelief. Our Hebrews text encourages the faithful to look where the saints of old looked: to God’s promises, which are fulfilled in Christ Jesus.

Remember the song looking for love in all the wrong places. We do that. We look for love we look for God’s love and for our salvation in all kinds of wrong places, persons, and things. We know we need to be loved, even need to be saved, but we don’t always remember where it can be found. And so, we look for love and its attendant salvation in all the wrong places.

We think love starts with us. We think our hearts have to want to love, and then we need to find another heart that wants to love us in return. And there are all sorts of dating sites and services to help us find love, to find the one with whom we have harmony, our perfect match. We take inventories of our likes and dislikes, our aptitudes, and our attitudes, and what we are looking for in a mate.

Likewise with our gods. We decide what our god is supposed to be; he or she or it becomes a product of what we are looking for. Is god a nice guy, a sweet grandmother, or a kindly ole elf? Does this god love me regardless of anything I do? Is my god near or far, imminent or transcendent? Are our gods personal beings, or are they simply objects of our adoration or that in which we place our trust money, pleasure, job, family, and so on?

Or are we our own gods? Do we rely on ourselves and the labor of our hands for love and salvation?

Do we claim to believe in the God of the Bible the triune God, Father and Son and Holy Spirit yet depend on our works in our church or in our home or in our vocations to make God happy with us, love us, or hold us worthy enough to come into his presence?

How many times have we heard people say, “So-and-so’s a good Christian because she or he does such-and-such”? How many times have you been told that to be a better Christian you need to do something—anything?

Just mistake our reading in Hebrews 11, for example. These are great heroes of the faith. Look at all that they did! Abraham offered up Isaac; Isaac blessed his sons; Jacob, we remember, wrestled with God; Joseph saved the sons of Israel from famine; Moses stood up to Pharaoh and led God’s people through the wilderness; the people crossed the Red Sea; Joshua brought the walls of Jericho down; Rahab welcomed the Israelite spies. We could go on and say, “If you want to be a good Christian, you need to be like these people and do the things they did.”

But then we'd miss the point. This chapter isn't about what they did; rather, it's about God's gift of faith to them. Missing the point, we look to the work of our hands or to gods of our own making. We look for love and salvation in ourselves and in the products of our imagination. We look for love in all the wrong places.

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the rest looked to the one true God the God who makes himself known, who promised to come to save us, who is love itself. The saints of old looked to the promised Christ.

Each example the author of Hebrews gives is prefaced with the phrase *"by faith."* *"By faith Abraham . . . offered up Isaac"; "By faith [Moses] left Egypt";* and *"By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land"* (vs 17–29).

Their faith is our faith. We have the same God. Just as he spoke to them, he speaks to us through his Word. And it is through that very same Word that we all came to the faith—the faith, with the definite article. As we confess in our Creed, *"In the same way [the Holy Spirit] calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith"* (SC III 2).

We cannot even believe in the promised Christ without the work of the Holy Spirit, who creates and sustains faith. Nothing we do can make us worthy to stand before God. Hebrews 12:2 encourages us to look to Jesus, who is *“the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”* We are to look to Jesus, for he is love and salvation incarnate. But on our own, we couldn't.

Thanks be to God that before we could look to Jesus, Jesus looked to our salvation.

He looked resolutely toward that hill outside Jerusalem called Calvary. There he endured the cross suffering in our place, taking upon his flesh the Father's full wrath, making the all-atoning sacrifice. There he despised the shame, becoming a scandal before the devil and the nations. He was not afraid of the humiliation and the ridicule and the mocking, for he was looking to redeem us with his own blood. And after three days, he was exalted by the Father, vindicated in his resurrection from the dead, and is now seated with authority over all things.

All his enemies have become his footstool even the false gods and works and all those things that take our eyes off him.

Jesus looked to our salvation long before we were conceived and born. Jesus looked to our salvation and accomplished it, looking to us in his great and superabundant love. Jesus looks upon us and, by his might, bestows upon us his love and salvation. As we confess, by faith, ***“Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven.”***

By faith, we, too, look to Jesus. And, by faith, we see him, we behold him, here, in our midst, through the Means of his Grace. By faith, we see our joining to the Lord’s death and resurrection in the waters of Baptism. By faith, we trust that the forgiveness proclaimed by the pastor is Christ’s forgiveness. By faith, we discern Jesus’ body and blood in the bread and the wine. By faith, we recognize that the Word proclaimed is the only sure and certain Word that grants life eternal. Finally, by faith, we witness God’s consoling love in our hands and in those of others.

The hymn “Abide with Me” (*LSB* 878:6), evokes the image of a saint going to bed and praying a final prayer before sleep overtakes him or her.

It prays:

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;

Shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies.

Heav'n's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;

In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

Consider the words and the faith expressed in those powerful lines.

“Hold Thou Thy cross,” for it is in the cross of Christ that we behold our salvation. While we may look to many other things distractions and diversions it is Christ’s cross that saves us. It shines through the darkness of our sin and our sinful condition; it directs our eyes away from the earth and to heaven. “In life, in death,” it prays, **“O Lord, abide with me,”** asking not to end in death but to return to life. For on the cross Jesus died our death, and by his resurrection Jesus gives us his life. For the Lord to abide with his saints means life, abiding life, everlasting life. He is the God of the living, and we live forever in his presence. This is the faith in which those heroes of Hebrews 11 all died (Hebrews 11:13).

We need not look for love or salvation in any other place than in this place. This is the right place. Here, Jesus is in our midst. He is our love and our salvation.

Amen