

Grace, peace and mercy be unto you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Before I became a pastor, I was a computer systems architect. I was expected to know every part of the systems I integrated for people. Over time as my knowledge increased, it seemed like there was nothing I didn't understand. Then my company switched to a new supplier, and this meant that suddenly I was dealing with many things I didn't understand. I really didn't like that. I don't like not understanding things. I'm sure you've been there too! The Bible sometimes causes me to acknowledge my lack of understanding, and today is no exception. Christ says to the official, "Unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe." Although He seems to rebuke the man, Christ still gives him the sign he wants. Why does Christ do that? Also, the man believed the Word of Jesus in verse 50, yet it says again in verse 53 that when he heard the report that the child was healed, he believed. Did he come to faith twice? Surely he did not gain faith and lose it again in a few hours?

Part of the problem for us is that faith is a mystery. How does any person believe? We Lutherans know that the Holy Spirit gives faith by calling us through the Gospel, not by our reason or strength. Yet that does not really solve the problem for us. Since faith is beyond our reason, we cannot fully comprehend the moment when a person is converted. He goes from a lost sinner full of nothing but sin and unbelief to a saint of God with faith, clothed with the righteousness of Christ.

We may struggle with this in light of the task of evangelism. We know that the Spirit calls people to faith through the Gospel. But when we speak the Good News of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection, people do not always believe. Some may believe later on, or others not

at all. In the same way, not all to whom Christ preached the Gospel were saved.

We may forget that the Holy Spirit works faith in those who hear the Word when and where it pleases Him. This may be especially vexing when those close to us, family and friends, hear the Gospel and seem to believe, yet go away from the Church. They may either abandon the faith once taught to them, or they never had faith at all. We wish that we had a magic wand to make people come to faith. But even the Word is not a magic wand. It only gives faith when and where it pleases God.

The best we can do is trust in the Gospel of Christ ourselves, and speak it to others when we have opportunity, and leave the rest to Christ. Our hearts may break at times when some do not believe, yet we trust that our Lord is loving and gracious.

Another complication in this mystery of faith is that there are two aspects of faith. There is the aspect of faith which is obedience to the First Commandment, and there is the aspect of faith that is a free gift from the Holy Spirit. Our obedience to the Commandment is always flawed. Our efforts at trusting God are imperfect and spoiled by our sinful flesh. Yet God's gift of faith is always perfect. So saving faith is flawless and reliable.

So we see the man in our text believing, yet believing again. At one point he seems to believe only in the promise of Christ to heal his son. That is an imperfect beginning of faith. Yet that is better than when he came to Christ at the beginning. Then he seemed to only believe the healing would happen if Christ came in person to do the healing.

Even better is the faith the man had when he heard that his son was healed that very hour. Then his faith saw that the Word of Christ is powerful enough to instantaneously heal from any distance. The Word that created that kind of healing is more than the word of a man, even if the man were somehow able to heal. This is the Word of the Lord.

So the man believes and all his household with him. What began as a sluggish faith that only reluctantly grew became a faith that spilled over to others around him, surely because he spoke to them about Christ. Where growth was slow one minute, it became swift another.

We also struggle in weakness. Sometimes growth comes slow, or does not seem to come at all, whether in terms of personal growth or the numbers of congregational members. Other times, things move forward more rapidly. Who can understand it? It is like the wind that blows here and there, we know not why, or like the growth of seeds in the ground. The work of the Holy Spirit is a mystery, not for us to comprehend. May we simply trust that the Lord will do all things in the best way and at the best time.

At the right time, He gave us faith through His signs which are the Sacraments. We could not believe without those signs, so He sent them to us. He has washed us with healing water and fed us with miraculous food. His powerful Word is joined to the physical elements. This is not the word of a mere man, but the Man who is God. So all we who were born as children of death are raised to new life.

That is why He became the Son of Man. As a human being, He could take our place as a child destined for death. When He received our death, He rescued us. Then He was raised to show that death was beaten. He did not need to beat death for Himself, since He was always the immortal Son of God who only laid down His life by His free choice. For our sake, He died and rose to beat death.

So even when we hover at the brink of death, we need not fear it. The mighty Word of Christ has spoken for us. The sign of Baptism has raised us to new life. Our Savior's death and resurrection demonstrate that the grave has lost its sting. Therefore we can be calm and ready to meet our Lord. Even if fleshly fears disturb us, we know the outcome already because He has spoken the Word. Although we have not seen the result yet with our eyes, we can count on the fulfillment of what our dear Lord has promised.

The Holy Spirit give us sure confidence and faith that does not waver.
Amen.