

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

We're glad to have Mr. Schlicker and the young people of his A Cappella Choir here with us today. A hearty welcome to you all and to any family members who are with us today.

They say that growing up is hard these days — as if it's harder today than ever before. I wonder about that. Certainly for us in the United States it's not so if you think about it from an economic standpoint or from a comfort standpoint. Perhaps it's so from a spiritual standpoint — there are so many things the devil uses to tug at our youth and try to woo them away from the faith.

On the other hand, if you consider our Old Testament text this morning, life for the faithful in Jerusalem was not all that great, and we hear a bit of the prophet Habakkuk's complaint: "*O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you 'Violence!' and you will not save?*" After all Nebuchadnezzar's army had laid siege to Jerusalem. That doesn't sound very pleasant, a bit more dangerous than anything I have ever experienced. No wonder the prophetic wail! No wonder the lament that the Lord seemed indifferent to iniquity and justice.

Or consider the Gospel. Jesus was talking to His disciples, and warned them about their teaching. "*Temptations to sin are sure to come,*" the ESV translates it, but the word here is σκάνδαλα — offenses ... offenses that harm faith, teachings that cause "*these little ones*" to be ensnared and fall into false belief. Therefore, Jesus says, "*but woe to the one through whom they come!*" The disciples who not long ago had returned with such excitement because "*even the demons [were] subject to [them] in [Jesus'] name*" (Luke 10:17), were being warned to make sure that their preaching was pure. As a pastor, I can tell you, that's a bit unnerving.

And then Jesus told them to be about the task of calling people to repentance and forgiving their sins. It doesn't sound too bad that way, but Jesus said, "*If your brother sins, rebuke him,*" and that's not easy, especially seven times in a day. Therefore, the apostles cried out to Jesus, "*Increase our faith!*"

It's a great prayer, but Jesus' answer is a bit surprising. No word of encouragement, no exhortation to abide in Jesus' word, but only an acknowledgment that, yes, your faith is little. You might recall that Jesus had told the disciples that very thing several times before—"*O you of little faith*" in daily worries, in the midst of a storm, as Peter was sinking in the sea, in their dull wits about who Jesus is. And here He says: "*If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.*"

Today's texts talk a lot about faith. "*The righteous shall live by his faith,*" said the Lord through the prophet. "*I am reminded of your sincere faith,*" Paul said of Timothy. "*Increase our faith,*" the disciples said.

Lutherans talk a lot about faith. It was a major issue in the theological debates with Rome. The Lutherans said, "People are freely justified for Christ's sake, THROUGH FAITH, when they BELIEVE that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake." Rome said, "If any one shall say, that BY FAITH ALONE the impious is justified; so as to mean that nothing else is required TO CO-OPERATE in order [to obtain] the grace of justification ..." and again "If any one shall say, that men are justified either BY THE SOLE IMPUTATION of the righteousness of Christ, or BY THE SOLE REMISSION OF SINS, ... or even that the grace, by which we are justified, is only THE FAVOUR OF GOD; let him be anathema" (Trent, Canons IX and XI)—let him be condemned. Lutherans, not just the theologians, but the princes, staked their very lives on this article of being justified by grace through faith alone. It is called "the article upon which the church stands or falls" (attributed to Luther).

Yet one can be led astray by talk of faith, even with the prayer, "*Increase our faith,*" for the focus can turn inward. We can get "curved in on ourselves" and on our faith in the abstract. We can easily focus on faith itself, and not on its content. We can take pride in our faith as if it's something that we can accomplish, and all this turns this good gift of God into a sin that leads to death. Repent!

To be sure, we need our faith increased; we need it strengthened—but not faith in the abstract. We need it strengthened concretely, a faith in its object. This faith saves, a faith that hopes not in itself, but in the God "*who saved us and called us to a holy calling.*" This faith leads to life, a faith that confesses a salvation "*not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus.*" This faith justifies, a faith that "looks to Jesus Christ alone" and "clings to Jesus' cross alone" (LSB555), that confesses that God has forgiven us "*through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death [by His cross] and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*" Jesus Christ is the object of our faith; He is the content of "*THE FAITH that was once for all delivered to the saints*" (Jude 3). Indeed, He is the One—the One who stilled the storms and walked on water and fed the thousands and rose from the dead—who would uproot the mulberry tree and plant it in the sea if you asked, not your faith smaller even than a mustard seed, but the object of your faith.

Why do we spend so much time focusing on our faith, taking pride in our faith? Don't you recall that you have been saved "*BY GRACE, through faith,*" that is, by God's favor alone; that is it solely by "*the gift of God*" (Eph. 2:8)? Don't you

recall that “[you] cannot by [your] own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, [your] Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called [you] by the Gospel, enlightened [you] with His gifts, sanctified ... [you] in the true faith” (Small Catechism, 3rd Article)?

Moreover, He keeps you in the faith, and yes, strengthens you in this faith. What faith? The faith that believes “in Jesus Christ, [your] Lord” and “rests in Him unceasing” (LSB555). The faith that daily prays “increase our faith in Christ,” and drowns the old Adam in the remembrance of the water and word by which that faith was given, that a new man might emerge to live before God in righteousness and purity. The faith that prays “Thy kingdom come,” and then comes to where the Holy Spirit especially gives His grace through the word proclaimed, where we are led ever more to believe that “holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity” (Small Catechism, LP, 2nd Petition). The faith that comes to Christ’s altar to receive the forgiving body and blood of the Lamb sacrificed for the sins of the world and goes away strengthened “in faith toward [our God] and in fervent love toward one another” (LSB DS Setting 3). The faith that looks not inward at one’s own believing, but outward to Christ. The faith that seeks to do all we have been commanded, and says finally, “*We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.*”

Life is tough. Always has been, and always will be, until we are called to our final Sabbath rest. “Lord Jesus, we look to you for help. Increase our faith. ‘Guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice. Although we are attacked by these things, we pray that we may finally overcome them and win the victory’” (Small Catechism, LP, 6th Petition).

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