

A Wavering Faith?

Luke 7:18-28

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

December 13, 2015 – Third Sunday of Advent



In the name of the Father, and of † the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Today, as is often the case during Advent, our Gospel reading is focused on the life and work of John the Baptist. Of course, you already know a great deal about John. You know that he spent much of his ministry in the desert wilderness preaching about repentance and about God's Son, Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The portrait Holy Scripture paints of John is of a man with a resolute steadfastness. He was strong and had deeply held, God-given convictions. He was determined to tell it "like it is" no matter the consequences. Indeed, for the sake of this work, he even held back from enjoying the things of this world.

But today's Gospel gives us a slightly different spin on John. For instance, Matthew's Gospel reports that when John was in prison He inquired of Jesus concerning who He was and what He was about. John's days were already numbered. He had preached the truth, and that truth had earned him an extended stay behind bars. So, naturally one might wonder why John would have spent so much time and energy preaching about Jesus if he didn't know who He was or why He had come. Was John wavering in his faith? Was he doubting the truth of what he had been preaching? Who among you is so strong in your faith that you've never doubted the realities of what it is you believe? Which one of you in a moment of weakness hasn't ever said to himself that all this talk about Jesus couldn't possibly be true – or that's it's simply too amazing to have actually happened? And yet, as dangerous as that road might be, is there not one of you who hasn't walked on it from time to time?

But you're in good company, for I dare say that every great hero of the faith has at one time or another questioned the truth and validity of the Biblical witness. But John the Baptist – perhaps the most well-known of all the saints of God? Could he really have wavered in his faith? That's certainly what some have suggested. So to understand the nature of John's inquiry, you first need to take a brief look at what some of the other Gospel writers recorded

about this event – how each one weaves in and out as it goes back and forth from John, to Jesus, to John's disciples, and finally, ends up with Jesus again. Now both Jesus and John were Rabbis. Each was an established teacher of some renown who had a dedicated following of their own disciples who spent *a lot* of time sitting at their feet. You see, the relationship between a Rabbi and his disciples was one that required intense learning. A disciple's "job" if you will, was to learn everything the Rabbi knew, so that one day he could go out – perhaps as a Rabbi himself – and teach others exactly what he had learned. In this way, a continuity and continuation of the teachings, traditions and saying passed down from generation to generation would be assured.

A Rabbi's disciples were absolutely loyal to their Rabbi. To be sure, just look at how loyal John's disciples were to him – maybe too loyal, given the circumstances. For instance, look at John's Gospel, the 3rd chapter, where it's reported that a short time before John was thrown into prison a dispute arose between some of his disciples and the Jews. It seems these particular disciples were upset with Jesus. So they went to John and said to him: "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified – they were speaking about Jesus – behold, He is baptizing, and *all* are coming to *Him!*" That was when John tried to convince them that Jesus was the greater, saying: "He must increase, but I must decrease."

On another occasion, John's disciples were comparing Jesus with John. Matthew reports this incident in the 14th verse of the 9th chapter, saying that John's disciples confronted Jesus and asked Him, saying: "Why do we and the Pharisee fast often, but *Your* disciples do not fast?" These were very bold men, and it's evident from their words that no matter what John told them, they weren't about to be convinced that they ought to be following Jesus. And that takes us to this morning's Gospel, where Luke reports that John was being held in prison – and how even though John had spent a great deal of time preaching about Jesus – his own disciples, loyal to him as they were, apparently hadn't paid much

attention to the content of their teacher's admonition that they were to become followers of Jesus.

So John wondered what was going to happen to them when he was dead and gone – which would be very soon. These disciples were just one short step from attaining the status of Pharisees themselves. Soon they will be all on their own. Hence, here in this text, it's reported that John wisely sent these two particular disciples to visit with Jesus in order that they might inquire of Him as to who He was. Then, as this Gospel points out – that is, at the very same hour when these disciples were there with Jesus – “He healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind, He bestowed sight.” In short, when John the Baptist – through his disciples – inquired of Jesus, I'd like to suggest that it may actually have been for their benefit, and not John's, for then they would be able to see first hand *with their own eyes* the miracles Jesus performed.

The tipoff here that it may not have been John who was wavering in his faith is perhaps evident by what Jesus later said to the crowd after John's disciples had left. “What did you go out to see?” He asked them, “a reed shaken by the wind?” In other words, Jesus took that opportunity to assure the crowd who had gathered around Him that John was no reed shaken by the wind. John had not been wavering in *his* faith. Indeed, John and Jesus were working in league with one another to teach John's hard-headed, stubborn disciples – even though at the time they didn't know John was teaching them a lesson.

But John's inquiry was also as much for us as it was for his disciples. In fact, it was perhaps the last time John would be able to point to Jesus and say: “make straight the way of the Lord.” It was, perchance, the turning point for these disciples of John, but this incident was recorded by St. Luke for the people of every time and age. It was something the writers of the Gospels thought the Church needed to know. And it's a reminder for us that the devil and our own sinful flesh are assaulting and threatening us every day, and that we are often just as blind to it as were John's disciples. In terms of our own faith and worship we are often given over to emotionalism and man-centered comfort. If something gives us a “warm fuzzy” feeling we may be so impacted by it, that we won't even stop to see whether the doctrine behind it is good or not – or whether a given liturgy or hymn is centered on Christ and His

cross. You and I, we need what's real and lasting. We need good Liturgy and good hymnody – that which clearly and unequivocally preaches Christ to us – that which gives us a lasting, substantive peace rather than an emotional quick fix devoid of any real meaning. What benefits us most are those things which will feed us good doctrine – things that will lead us to Christ and His gifts.

If you're going to be honest about it, it isn't hard to see a pattern emerging in Churches throughout the history of American Lutheranism – where congregations past and present have had a strong tendency to follow their pastor more than the teachings of Holy Scripture. Indeed, it's a problem common to all mankind. That problem is sin. We allow ourselves to get caught up in the world, and so we also allow our sinful flesh to direct and guide our life and actions. What we need to do is repent – to be mindful of our sinful tendencies so that we can go back to the cross, not just in our daily lives, but also in our theology, our worship life, and our Church – those places that matter most. For where your heart is centered only on Christ and His work to save us, one's daily life and worship practices will most surely follow.

At the end of this morning's Gospel, Jesus spoke to the crowds, saying: “He Who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than John.” In other words, God – incarnate in human flesh and made man, but without sin – is to be the all and everything of the Church's life – of your life and mine. Liturgy, hymnody, prayers, Bible study, proclamation, service and love must always have Christ as the Center and Focal Point of everything in your life as a child of God. True, it's a constant battle that will never leave us alone while here in this world. But, you and I, we have a teacher, a Rabbi, a Lord and Savior who has promised to bear you up when your foot hits against a stone. Jesus is the eternal God who has healed you of your sins even as He healed all those people on that day when John's disciples went to question Him. Rest in His fleshly wounds, dear Christian, and know this: your life, your eternal life, the only life worth living, is in His cross – and in the preaching of His cross you are always being built up unto life everlasting. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.