



GOSPEL FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY— ANOTHER SERMON

John 4:46-54

So He came again to Cana in Galilee, where He had made the water wine. And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill. When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to Him and asked Him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. So Jesus said to him, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." The official said to Him, "Sir, come down before my child dies." Jesus said to him, "Go; your son will live." The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way. As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering. So he asked them the hour when he began to get better, and they said to him, "Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him." The father knew that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live." And he himself believed, and all his household. This was now the second sign that Jesus did when He had come from Judea to Galilee.

1. This Gospel reading presents us with a beautiful example of the characteristics and nature of faith, namely, that it is to increase and become perfect. It portrays faith as something which does not lie quiet and idle, but is something living, restless, which either regresses or progresses, which lives and moves. If this does not happen, then it is not faith, but a dead idea in the heart about God, for true, living faith, which the Holy Spirit pours into the heart, simply cannot be idle. I say this so that no one will be secure, thinking that once he has laid hold of faith he will persist in it. What is important is not the beginning, but continuing, more and more as time goes on, and increasing and learning to know God better.

2. On the other hand, it is the nature of our adversary, the devil, that he, too, is not idle, as St. Peter says, "Your adversary, the devil, goes about like a roaring lion and seeks someone to devour" [1 Pet. 5:8]. Now, since the devil does not sleep and take a vacation, it is not proper for a Christian to be idle and fold his hands in his lap, but rather to think about how to take strength against the devil's power. He is called "the prince of this world" [John 14:30],

for example, in today's Epistle reading: "We do not fight with flesh and blood, but with the princes and rulers, with the lords of the world, who rule in the darkness of this world, with the evil spirits under heaven" [Eph. 6:12]. This prince rules the world, raves and rages, is mad and wild, and cannot tolerate it if a Christian makes progress. He cannot tolerate this, for then there would be a breach in his kingdom, and his net would be torn. Therefore, as much as he can, he lets no Christian prosper.

3. Now, when the fire of faith is kindled and rises, and the devil feels and becomes aware of it, then he immediately snatches at it with all his cunning, for he knows the harm his kingdom will receive from it. Therefore, he earnestly defends his kingdom and is devoted to keeping everything under his obedience. Accordingly, it is certain that when a Christian begins to believe, temptation and persecution will pursue him at his heels. If this does not happen, it is a sign that the faith is not genuine and the Gospel has not been correctly understood. The villain, the devil, has sharp eyesight and is soon aware of a true Christian. He then devotes himself to ruining him; he surrounds him and attacks him on all sides, for he cannot tolerate anyone leaving his kingdom.

4. This is why it is dangerous to live this way, for the devil soon takes us by surprise. This happens even to the great saints who grasp the Word of God correctly: when they are standing up and thinking that they are secure, then this villain is right behind them, knocks them down, and wrestles with them until they are thrown to the ground.

Look at what happened to the great people, to Moses, Aaron, and the princes of the Jews: they had a beautiful faith when they led the people out of Egypt. All the people went in faith through the Red Sea, through death and through many other miracles in which they demonstrated their faith. Finally, they fell over one point by which the other point was ruined. They were afraid that the people would have to die of hunger and thirst in the barren wilderness. Is it not a pity that they demonstrated their faith in these important points—since they went into and through death, wrestled with and conquered it, so that they thought they were the best—and then they fell when they let their belly win, grumbling against God! Then they were so fiercely attacked that they all fell, and the devil knocked them down. Therefore, it is not something certain and secure when someone begins to believe, unless he continually progresses more and more.

5. Even Moses, who otherwise had a strong faith, fell when he struck water out of the rock with his staff. He doubted and said to the people: "Come here, and we will see if we can force water out of the rock for you" [Num. 20:10]. Good Moses, who had done so many miracles, fell into reason and into a fleshly understanding and was afraid that the unbelief of the people

would prevent this great miracle and sign. But he should have continued clinging to the Word; he should have regarded it higher, greater, stronger, and more powerful than the unbelief of the people. But the good man was fiercely attacked, so that he stumbled and fell.

6. In the New Testament we have similar examples. Peter was sure and strong in faith when he saw Christ [walking] on the water and spoke from his strong faith: "Lord, let me come to You" [Matt. 14:28]. He climbed out of the boat into the water, sure that the water would support him. There was a remarkable faith and a bold spirit in St. Peter; he ventured securely into the midst of the water and into the danger, and even completely into death, trusting boldly and fearlessly in Christ. When he thought that he was most secure of all, a wind and storm arose, he forgot the Word, put aside his faith, sank down into the water, and went under. Where, now, was his great faith? Faith is a fragile, delicate thing; it is quickly disregarded, and then we stumble. The devil sees that the matter is quickly won if we are not watching.

7. How strongly the people were inclined toward Christ! They regarded Him to be a prophet, clung to Him, defended Him with such earnestness that even the rulers of the people were amazed and did not dare to lay a hand on Him. However, when they did seize Him and bind Him, lead Him away, and nail Him to a cross, then the people fell away. Just like that He is no longer a prophet; no one stands by Him, but they cry out against Him: "Crucify Him, crucify Him!" [Luke 23:21]; and what was still worse, His own disciples abandon Him [Mark 14:50]. Where, now, was their faith and holiness?

8. The same thing happens now at our time. At first, when the Gospel began, it was such a delightful preaching that all the world wanted to be Christians, and no one opposed it. When people began to attack the monks, priests, and nuns and to find fault with the Mass, then—oh!—they fell away like leaves from the trees. Afterward, when people attacked the princes, they persecuted the Gospel still more, and it began to decrease more and more. Because the devil still does not take a vacation, he stirred up many sects and factions. How many sects have we had so far? One reached for the sword, another attacked the Sacrament, and some attacked Baptism.¹ The devil does not sleep, and he will do many more such things. He looks around and devotes himself to making sure no true teaching remains in the Church. Finally (it is to be feared), he will bring it to the point that, if a man traveled throughout all of Germany, he would find no true pulpits where the Word of

¹ For example, Thomas Münzer had been executed as part of the peasant rebellion just five months before Luther preached this sermon. Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt (1486–1541), formerly Luther's colleague and supporter at the University of Wittenberg, had come to oppose Luther in 1521–22, rejecting the presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper, and infant Baptism. See Luther's *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1525), LW 40:73–223; and his letter to Philip Melancthon, January 13, 1522, LW 48:364–72.

God is preached purely as it was before. He tries with all his might to let no true teaching prevail, for he cannot tolerate it.

9. It is difficult to escape this enemy, who lies in wait, fights in every place, and pushes so hard that even the learned fall and the elect stumble, such as Moses [Num. 20:7–12], St. Peter [Matt. 14:28–31], and the apostles [Mark 14:50]. We think we are secure and let things creep along, but no one pays attention, no one takes care. We should ask and implore God to preserve the Gospel and have His holy name preached further, but no one cares, no one asks that it make progress. Thus it will happen that God will treat us and the devil the same, and it will be over for us. He will knock us to the ground, and we will have great misery because of our arrogance and laziness.

10. The devil can also get the sectarians to think that they are right, just as the Arians gave their affair a great splendor.² There was no one who had seen whether what they did was correct or incorrect. The Christian, however, takes captive his thinking, presumes nothing, but humbly says to God: "Dear Lord, though I am certain about this matter, yet I cannot keep it without You; help, or I am lost." He is as certain of the matter as St. Peter was on the sea, who could not be more certain that the water would support him, since he knew of no further obstacle. But when the wind roared around, then he saw where he was wrong [Matt. 14:30]. This must now be firmly grasped in the heart. For even though we are certain about the matter, have Scripture, and are also secured and equipped as best we can with clear passages, it still depends on the power, will, and might of God, who protects us and restrains the devil, our adversary and great enemy.

11. This happens, however, so that God may make us alert and keep us in fear, so that we are always concerned and cry out to Him: "Lord, help us and increase our faith, for without You we are lost" [Matt. 8:25; Luke 17:5]. Our hearts should always be in the situation as though we were beginning to believe today, and we should always have the same attitude toward the Gospel as if we had never heard it, and must begin each day. It is the nature of faith to grow and continue without ceasing. The devil (as said above) does not take a vacation and does not rest. If he is knocked down once, he stands up again; if he cannot get in the front door, he looks for how he may creep in the back; if he cannot get in the back, then he breaks in through the roof or digs under the doorsill. He works until he gets in. He seeks all kinds of cunning and attacks. If he fails at one point, he takes up another and works at it until he wins.

² The teaching of the Alexandrian presbyter Arius (ca. 280–336), that the Word (John 1:1) was only the highest creature and not true God, was condemned at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, but his numerous supporters regained the ascendancy under the sons of Emperor

12. On the other hand, man is poor and weak, as St. Paul says, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels" (2 Corinthians 4 [:7]). "The treasure" is the Gospel. But I am weaker than a jar in the presence of the potter; a jar is something weak which is easily broken, and then everything in it is spilled. So, when the devil perceives that faith is a treasure kept in a poor jar, he rants and raves and says to us in his wrath: "I will strike you and dash your jar to pieces. You have a great treasure which I will spill. If I were permitted, how quickly I would dash your jar to pieces! You are nothing but a poor and miserable jar!"

13. Now God puts the poor jar among the enemies. How quickly will its destruction happen! It can be dashed to pieces with a club. If even a serpent would bite it, it would go to pieces. It would be simple for the devil to smash an entire country in a moment. This is why he is angry that God begins the matter with him in such a foolish way. He opposes him with a poor jar, and yet he is a great prince and powerful lord of the world. It would also offend me, if I were a strong man and someone were to defy me with a straw. I would certainly tear the straw to pieces in my anger! I would prefer that he opposed me with spear, sword, and all armor, just as it offended the strong Goliath when David dared to step against him with a staff but without armor [1 Sam. 17:38–43]. The devil is also the same way. He is angry that God intends to trample him underfoot with flesh and blood. If a great spirit were against him, it would not be so offensive to him. But it greatly offends him that a poor maggot sack,³ a fragile jar, should sit there defying him, a weak vessel against such a mighty prince. God has put this treasure (says Paul [2 Cor. 4:7]) in a poor, weak vessel, for man is weak, quickly becomes angry, is greedy, arrogant, and burdened with other defects, through which the devil could quickly dash the jar to pieces, and, if God would permit him, he would very quickly do away with all people in the same way that he ruins many souls through false teaching. Now, all of this happens (says Paul) so that we would know that it does not depend on our might but on God's power. Thus God has provoked the devil, ruining and destroying him through the weakest weakness of flesh and blood. This offends him so exceedingly that he goes about like a roaring lion in order to shatter and smash the weak vessels and jars.

All of this happens, however, so that we may be anxious, lift up our eyes to heaven, and implore God's help. Thus we have begun to believe that God will promote this and protect and keep the vessel safe through His power, even though the devil wants to dash it to pieces and trample it underfoot, as he overcomes the others who are his and has joy and delight in them. That is the preface to the Gospel reading. Now we want to look at each part of the text.

There was a royal official whose son was sick at Capernaum. [John 4:46]

16. There have certainly been more people who had sick children, but we should note what he says right after this:

He heard that Jesus came from Judea into Galilee, went to Him, and asked Him to come down and help his son, for he was at the point of death. [John 4:47]

17. This is where faith which trusts Christ begins. This Gospel reading points out that he had faith, for when he heard that Christ heals the sick, his heart grasps at this, clings to Christ, and thinks: "If He helps all people, He will also help me and heal my son." He regarded Christ to be a man who can help people, and he expects every benefit from Him. Now, the heart of a true Christian clings to Christ. However, if this royal official had been in doubt, he would not have come to Christ, but his heart would have hesitated: "He certainly helps other people, but who knows whether He will also help me?" and he would have neglected the matter. But his faith lived, and so he got up and went to Christ. This was the beginning of faith.

18. Now look at how obliquely and paradoxically Christ met him and how his faith was attacked when He said to him:

"If you do not see signs and wonders, you do not believe." [John 4:48]

19. How does this make sense? He says, "You do not believe," and yet he has faith. The Lord spoke the same way to St. Peter: "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" [Matt. 14:31]. Peter was certain of the matter and had faith, and so he went on the water; but when he saw the wind, he doubted and sank under. So also here: The good man heard the report that Christ helps everyone; he believed this and came to Him. But when he heard that Christ refused to come to him, he was offended, his faith collapsed, and he worried that Christ would not help him. This was a blow, a temptation to the newly begun faith, for the words were harsh: "Unless you see wonders and signs, you do not believe," etc. These words were a temptation and caused him to doubt, so that he stumbled. The devil stood behind him and said: "Go into the house; attend to your affairs. He does not want to help you." The royal official, however, did not quickly weaken, but said to the Lord:

"Sir, come down before my child dies." [John 4:49]

20. His faith no doubt wanted to collapse and sink. The Lord, however, did not forsake him, but helped him up again and said to him:

"Go your way; your son lives." [John 4:50]

21. He had an excellent faith; otherwise he would not have summoned Him to his son. What, then, did he lack? He was mistaken in this: that he believed that if Christ came to his house, then He could heal his son. He thought, however, that if He were not present, then He could not heal him. His faith did not yet reach so far, but he believed that Christ could heal only if He were present. Therefore, he had to have a higher degree of faith.

His weak faith was gone, the jar was shattered, and he thought his son had to die. Christ, however, went ahead and raised him up again, put him in a higher situation, and said to him: "Go your way; your son lives." Thus he ascended from his first faith (when he believed that Christ could heal if He were present) to a higher faith, so that he now believed the bare Word. If he had not believed the Word, he would not have left Him alone until He went with him. But he laid hold of the Word, believed Christ, and clung to it. The son was at home, but Christ was with the father.

22. Now, however, he laid hold of the Word in his heart and said to himself: "My son is sick, but I will find him healthy." This was a faith against reason and experience. Reason would have spoken in this way: "If, when I first left my son, he was already at his last gasp, how can he now be or become healthy, because He will not even go to him?" Faith, however, says the opposite, takes its stand directly in the Word, is filled with it, and does not at all doubt that it is no different than as the words sound: "Go your way; your son lives."

23. This is an excellent, strong faith, when the man can put off mind, understanding, reason, eyes, and heart, and sink into one little word, and be content and secure in it. Just as Christ says, "Your son lives," so also this faith says, "It is certainly true that I will find it this way." Thus faith does not remain idle and quiet, but continues and becomes stronger.

24. This is what Christ also does for us: He lets us be attacked, so that we increase in faith. And if at our end, when we are to die, we had a spark of this faith, then we would do well, just as Christ said in the Gospel of Matthew [17:20] to His disciples: "If you have faith like a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain: 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you." A mustard seed is very small, but whoever has this faith will certainly be saved. We should not look at the fact that faith is small, but we must look at and see to it that the mustard seed remains and is not eaten by birds, that is, that the devil does not snatch faith out of our hearts. It does not depend on how small faith is; rather, a lot depends on taking care that it not be overthrown.

25. Peter certainly had an excellent faith when at Christ's word he boldly went out on the water; for this reason the water supported him so that he

did not sink. If he had remained in this faith, he could have walked fully a hundred miles on the water; however, when he hesitated, he began to sink. Therefore, it does not depend on how strong or small faith is, but that it remains, no matter how small it may be. It can happen that someone who has a small faith remains in faith, and someone who has a strong faith sinks down and doubts. Moses also had a great and strong faith, so that he led the people of Israel through the midst of the sea and through death. However, later he and his brother fell, even though God quickly lifted them up again [Num. 20:12]. The thief on the cross, however, laid hold of faith once and persisted in it [Luke 23:42].

26. God does these things to knock down our arrogance, so that we do not become defiant and presumptuous but always remain in the fear [of God]; otherwise, when temptation comes, we would immediately fall into error.

God has given us a beautiful parable about this in the tree, which begins to blossom in the spring; then, the tree opens so much that it becomes completely white from blossoms. When the rain comes, many of the blossoms are taken away, and frost destroys still more. When the fruit begins to come on, and some wind comes, the young fruit falls—so much of it, as if it were snowing. Then, when the fruit becomes large, the caterpillars and worms arrive, which gnaw away, bite, and destroy the fruit so that scarcely the twentieth part, or even scarcely the hundredth part, remains good. The same thing also happens with the Gospel. When it begins, everyone wants to be a Christian; there is promise, and all are well-pleased. Then a wind or rain of temptation comes, and they fall away in droves. Then the sects and factions come, like the worms and beetles, gnaw at and pollute the fruit of the Gospel. So many false teachings arise that few of them remain with the Gospel.

27. Therefore, we should not be secure, even though we have begun in faith, nor be boastful, but always remain in the fear [of God]. By God's grace we are now rich in the Word of God and redeemed from deep and severe darkness. However, we also forget the Word, soon become lazy and bored, and, besides, we are otherwise weak. Now, if the devil once breaks in with false teaching and finds us idle and the house swept clean, then he will take seven devils worse than he is, and at last it will be worse than at the beginning [Luke 11:24–26]. Even if this should happen, still we should not despair because of it, but instruct one another, so that we learn to cling to God and say: "Merciful God, You have allowed me to become a Christian. Help me to remain one and to increase in faith from day to day. Even if the whole world should fall, each one become sectarian, and the devil shatter all the jars, I will not follow them, but with Your divine help remain with the Gospel." Each one should bear this in mind, as if he were alone in the world, as he will be

in death at the last, when no one will stand up for other people, but each one will have to stand up for himself.

28. Thus the faith of this man was very beautiful and precious. When he heard the words "your son lives," he believed them, went on his way, gave God the glory, laid hold of the Word alone, clung to it, and grasped for nothing else. Therefore, God honored him in return, kept his son alive, comforted him, did not leave him stuck in doubt and weakness, but made him certain and strong in faith and made him to continue and increase. He also does not wait until the man has come home to his house, but while he is still on the way He has his servants come to meet him with the happy news: "Your son lives!" [John 4:51]. For God cannot delay and stay away from a genuine heart which relies on Him alone, clings to His Word, and abandons all other things. Then God cannot conceal Himself, but lets Himself be seen, enters such a heart, and makes His dwelling there, as Christ says [John 14:23]. Thus He abundantly revealed Himself to this royal official, so that he would understand how pleased He was with this faith, which can cling to the bare Word so very strongly.

29. Now, what is more blissful and joyful than to believe His Word and let no temptation force us away from it, but only close our eyes against all temptations of the devil, put away mind and understanding, reason and all cleverness, and constantly say in our heart: "God has spoken; He cannot lie"? Nothing is more joyful, I say, than such faith, for what we ask from God in such faith we receive from Him more abundantly than we can ever desire, and God is with us sooner than we would have thought. In summary, everything depends only on believing and trusting in Him. This is why the evangelist uses so many superfluous words (as it seems to us), such as these:

The man believed the words Jesus spoke to him and went on his way. And when he went down, his servants met him, proclaimed, and said, "Your child lives." Then he inquired of them the hour when he got better, and they said to him: "Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him." So the father noted that it was about the hour when Jesus had said to him: "Your son lives." [John 4:50-53]

30. All of this happened so that we would know that, if we believe and trust in God, He will abundantly give us everything for which we ask.

And he and his whole house believed. [John 4:53]

31. He has so increased in faith that he has not only gone from a lower to a higher position, but he has also led other people to faith. He not only continued in his faith but has an active faith, which is not idle and quiet in

his heart, but which broke forth and preached this Christ and extolled how he came to Christ, received consolation from Him, and how he had received help through his faith, so that all who were in his house had to believe. It is the nature of faith that it draws in other people, breaks forth, and goes to work through love, as St. Paul says, "Faith, which is active through love, does this" [Gal. 5:6]. It is alive and can neither be quiet nor take a vacation, as King David says in Psalm [116:10] and as St. Paul applies this to believers, saying, "I believed; therefore, I have spoken" [2 Cor. 4:13]. Faith cannot do otherwise; it must break forth and speak; it cannot remain quiet, for it wants to be useful to its neighbor.

32. So also we who believe—we are to open our mouths and confess the grace that God has demonstrated to us. The greatest and highest work of faith is that each one should inform and teach others in the Word, as St. Paul says, "With the heart we believe for righteousness, but with the mouth we confess for salvation" (Romans 10 [:10]). If we are ashamed of the Word and suppress it when we are asked about it, this certainly is a sign of a worthless faith.

33. Thus we see that Christ does not make a distinction between those who are weak and strong in faith and rejects no one, for small faith is also faith, and if it only continues, it will always become stronger. Christ came into the world to receive, support, and endure the weak. If He were as impatient as we are, and He were to say to us quickly: "Go away from Me; I do not want you, for you do not believe as you ought"—who could be helped by Him? It is a great skill, however, to be able to deal gently with the weak, not quickly hitting them over the head and impatiently driving them away. Even if they are not strong today, it can happen in an hour that they grasp the Word more abundantly than we who imagine that we are strong.

34. Thus we are to instruct and teach one another to cling to His Word, for in this way we are strong enough for the devil. Otherwise he would in an hour shatter all of us like jars, and for him all people would be like a feather: however and whenever he wanted, he could blow them away. This feather, however, will be heavier for him than heaven and earth. A Christian has Christ in him, and Christ is heavier than heaven and earth. This is enough about this Gospel reading.