



**“Faith Comes First, Then Love Follows”**  
**22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**October 29, 2023 + Matthew 22:24-46**  
**Pastor Nancy M. Raabe**

“Have faith,” people often say to each other. Have faith that your surgery will be successful. Have faith that your job layoff will open up new vocational possibilities. Have faith that you will make it through your bar exam, your SATs, your midterm, or whatever test or trial is facing you.

We may have faith for a little while until the next hurdle or bit of bad news. But what would it take for a life to be lived entirely out of faith? Every moment, waking or sleeping?

Maybe it takes an encounter with death – your own death.

This is the story my limo driver told me Friday on the way to the airport for a one-day trip to Madison, Wisconsin. By the way, I am not a fancy person to have a limo, but Bill insists on this mode of getting me to the airport, and I am grateful.

Here is Michael’s story. Four months ago he was in his car approaching a red light. His foot slipped onto the gas pedal instead of the brake. At fairly slow speed he hit the person in front of him. The impact jerked his neck back, his head forward and his forehead whacked the visor (he is a tall person). Mild damage was assessed to both cars and he went home. A few days later his wife noticed a growing lump on his head and said he should get it checked out. No, he said, I’m fine. She insisted and he went to the ER. They quickly diagnosed a subdural hematoma and shipped him off to the ER at Jefferson Abington.

As they were putting a collar on his neck, Michael jerked it off because suddenly he couldn’t breathe. This is a serious effect of subdural hematomas. The situation required immediate and drastic surgery. The next thing he knew it was 16 days later. Most of that time he had teetered between life and death. They had put him on a ventilator, he’d gotten pneumonia in his greatly weakened state almost died – no, he told me, he actually did die for a few seconds until they managed to bring him back. He calls himself a million-dollar miracle. Now fully recovered, he sees all of life through the lens of faith. Now, every moment is sacred. Every moment is a gift from God.

Does it take a face-to-face encounter with death to awaken this awareness in us?

Reformation Sunday is a good day to think about what faith is and what it does, because this was the context for Martin Luther's big breakthrough -- that we are saved, made righteous, aligned with God, made perfect in God’s sight not because of anything we have done or anything we ever will do, but by the righteousness that God in his limitless grace has already conferred on us in the death of Jesus Christ – his death, so that we might live.

Faith is not the blind acceptance of creeds and doctrines, but a human response born of trust in God and the gratitude that our past rejection of God's love is no longer definitive for our status as the sinner. And goodness knows, we are and continue to be just that. We are rescued, Luther suddenly realized, through faith alone, in Christ alone, by grace alone. These are the "solas" – the "onlys" of the Reformation – only through faith, only in Christ, only by grace.

So what, then, is faith? Blind trust? No, quite the opposite. Faith is the grateful and authentic response of the human heart to God's reconciling movement into the world, a response made possible by the Holy Spirit, who enables us to become the people God wants us to be by relating us directly to God through Christ – the Son given to us to know and to love.

Because Jesus willingly died *for us* – those treasured words in our communion ritual -- we are made righteous in God's sight. The one who had no sin was condemned to die, yet through his death and resurrection we who do sin, we who cannot ever hope to stop stumbling in our pride and distractions, we are freed to live. God's grace, that mercy that we do not deserve, gives us that freedom to live as those created perfectly in God's image – remember what Jesus did to the Pharisees last week with the Roman coin? Another way to think of this is that the saving power of Christ is already complete and does not need repeating or re-enacting by any of us. There is nothing we need to do. The work of salvation for each of us is already done.

Faith is the authentic human response born of trust in God in gratitude that that our past rejections of God are no longer definitive for our status as a sinner. Faith, then, is the movement of the human heart toward God in response to God's reconciling movement into the world. Because of what Jesus has done for us, we are regarded by God as having perfectly fulfilled the law with no penalties for our transgressions. He who died was without sin; we who live would otherwise be lost in sin. Faith gratefully receives this gift of grace.

What does this mean for how we live? Luther's close colleague Philipp Melanchthon put it this way in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession: "Faith comes first, and love follows." Faith frees to love. Only this enables us to do what would otherwise be beyond human ability – to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind - and to love our neighbor as ourself.

How do we love in this way, we might ask? Faith is the answer. Without faith it would be impossible. We would fall off the deep edge at the very first step. I saw this illustrated delightfully on Friday night by a piece of memorabilia on display at the Madison church I was visiting. A confirmand years ago had written this on a piece of paper:

"My mom says video games are my enemies. Then she told me to love my enemies. Case closed."

The love that flows out of a life of faith is the key to the life of holiness to which Leviticus calls us in our first reading. Love of neighbor is the mark of a holy community and a holy people.

And what of my limo driver Michael? Now that he's resumed driving, is he resting on his laurels as the million-dollar miracle? No. Because of what he experienced, he is launching an entirely new program at Jefferson Hospital downtown where he will be mentoring patients in rehab, mostly older folks who are just trying to keep their bodies from collapsing under them. Every week he'll go down to listen to their stories and be an encouraging presence. If God could do this for me, he wants to tell them, he can do it for you too. Faith comes first, and love follows. Amen.