

"'In Spite of' in Addition to 'Because of' Faith"
Sermon for the Third Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary Year A
June 1, 2008
Text: Matthew 7:21-29
Dr. David T. Howeth

I think we would all agree that Jesus wants us to have faith. As Schubert Ogden, my theology professor in seminary, used to describe it, being a Christian means to have faith *in God, through Christ, with the Apostles* (whose faith was prompted and sustained by the presence of the Holy Spirit). But it is clear from what Jesus attempted to teach the Apostles that he was interested in developing in them, and eventually in us, not just any old kind of faith but a particular kind of faith. Certainly that seems to be the intention of the passage from Matthew that is our Gospel lesson for this morning.

In the passage Jesus begins by sounding a warning. He states that "not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." What this warning suggests to me is that *our faith must not be in name only*. Faith is more than spiritual name dropping, more than professing Jesus as Lord and Savior, as important as that is. There's more to it than that. Faith can't be that simplistic and superficial; there needs to be more substance to it. For faith to be authentic, it must go beyond words, even if those words are directed toward Jesus himself.

Then Jesus goes on to describe what authentic faith looks like and to draw a contrast between inauthentic and authentic faith by telling a

short parable about two builders, a foolish one and a wise one. The foolish builder constructs his building on sand, while the wise builder chooses to do so on rock instead. What is particularly interesting is that in Palestine, most of the time it doesn't make any difference whether a house is built on rock or sand. As one commentator states it,

a house built during the dry season, when not a drop of rain falls in Palestine, seems secure until the fall storms come. Then the rain, wind, and floods that gush down the dry wadis overwhelm the house built on sand, while the house built on the rock [remains standing]. . . . only the one who has built *with the coming storm in mind* is secure [Boring, p. 218].

Our faith can be like a house built on sand or a house built on rock. But the foundation of our faith may not make much of a difference to us day to day. A securely grounded faith may not look or feel that much different from one that is built on less solid footing . . . *until the storms of life hit*. Then it is ever so easy to tell the one from another. When the winds blow hard, the rain pelts down, and the flood waters rise only one house is left standing. Like a rock.

I think it is fair to distinguish between these two kinds of faith by calling one "because of" faith and the other "in spite of" faith. "Because of" faith is built on sand. "Because of" faith says, "I have faith in God *because of* all the marvelous things God has done for me. God has blessed my life richly, bestowed on me gifts in abundance, and provided for all my needs. In other words, God is seen pretty much like the Wizard of Oz, and we all know that the Wizard of Oz is one because, because, because, because, because—because of the wonderful things he does."

There is nothing wrong with "because of" faith. We *should* be grateful to God for all the good things he does for us. It's entirely appropriate to praise God from whom all blessings flow. And on most days, "because of" faith serves us quite well. "Because of" faith works just fine in the good times, when things are terrific. But we also need faith for the bad times, when things really stink. In the words of Steely Dan, "They got a name for the winners in the world; I want a name when I lose." If our faith in God is only "because of" faith, when bad things happen to us, when we feel like we are losing ground, we may have trouble hanging on to it.

And bad things *will* happen to us. We can run but we can't hide from the storms of life. Whether it's hail, a hurricane, a flash flood, a tornado, a lightning strike, a cyclone, or a tsunami—it will cause us pain and suffering. There are all kinds of storms to contend with: the death of a loved one, divorce, loss of employment, financial failure, a family crisis, chronic or even terminal illness. When these storms hit, they hit hard, and only the faith that rests on the rock can withstand them. I call such secure faith "in spite of" faith. It is faith that can stand up to the worst of storms. It remains true. It cannot be moved. It is solid and secure. Like a rock.

If you want to get a picture of "in spite of" faith, read the psalms. The psalter is full of examples of the people of Israel having to face the difficulties of life, but doing so without having their faith fail them. Our psalter reading for this morning is as good an example as any. Look closely at what the psalmist says. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble, in spite of how much the earth should change,

the mountains should shake, and the waters should roar and foam. Nations may be in an uproar; kingdoms may totter. In other words, everything may be going to hell in a handbasket, but the Lord of hosts is with us. God is our rock and our refuge in spite of whatever may be happening all around us.

It is my contention that in our country, particularly since 9/11, we need to move from "because of" faith to "in spite of" faith. I think "because of" faith has characterized our national civil religion for several decades. We have tended to praise and thank God for how richly the United States has been blessed and assumed, implicitly if not explicitly, that we have held some sort of special status with God because of the quality of life we enjoy as Americans. And unfortunately, a side effect of having mostly a "because of" faith as a country has been a national attitude characterized by pride at best and arrogance at worst.

But ever since 9/11 we have been exposed a little to what the rest of the world has experienced for quite some time, a world that is much less safe and secure than we previously thought it was. As a society, we have had to face the disturbing reality that our way of life is much more precarious and that we are much more vulnerable than we assumed before. We may not like the new reality we are still struggling to deal with, but like most challenges in life, it presents us with the opportunity for our faith to grow and develop and strengthen and mature. The development of more of an "in spite of" faith may be what we need most as Americans.

If there is an anthem for "in spite of" faith, the authentic faith most needed in our post 9/11 world, it surely is the old Shaker hymn,

"How Can I Keep from Singing?" Let me remind you of the text of this hymn and see if it doesn't suggest what authentic faith can mean for us in the midst of trials and tribulations, pain and suffering:

My life goes on in endless song
 Above earth's lamentations
 I hear the real, though far-off hymn
 That hails a new creation
 Through all the tumult and the strife
 I hear its music ringing
 It sounds an echo in my soul
 How can I keep from singing?

But though the tempest loudly roars
 I hear the truth, it liveth
 And though the darkness 'round me close
 Songs in the night it giveth
 No storm can shake my inmost calm
 While to that rock I'm clinging
 Since love is lord of heaven and earth
 How can I keep from singing?

As a country and as individuals, we need to have this more solid kind of faith, and the good news is that in many cases we have. "In spite of" faith is present within this congregation. I've seen it over the past two years. In fact, my having the opportunity to witness its expression over and over again here has been one of the real blessings of my experience at Schreiber. There are individuals in this church who have the kind of faith that can and will stand up to some of the worst difficulties this life has to offer. There are people in our church family who have struggled with tremendous pain and loss. Life has not been fair to them. They have had more than their share of suffering. But it has not diminished

their faith. It has remained strong, solid, secure. Like a rock.

That doesn't mean they haven't had doubts. That doesn't mean they haven't asked questions. That doesn't mean that they haven't gotten angry with God. I know they have. That's all a part of what it means to have "in spite of" faith. They have shed tears, raised their voices, and shaken their fists at God. But their faith—in God and God's love and kindness toward them—their faith has not failed them. These people, with their "in spite of" faith, have been a real inspiration to me and have helped me to continue to grow and develop my own "in spite of" faith.

Like most things in life, "in spite of" faith doesn't just happen accidentally. It must be grown and developed intentionally. It takes work; effort has to be expended. And Jesus also makes it clear the nature of that effort. Notice again what he says about the two builders: those who hear Jesus' words and do nothing about them are like the foolish builder, but those who hear Jesus' words and put them into practice are like the wise builder. As one commentator suggests,

what separates the wise from the foolish builder is the *doing* of [Jesus' words]. The words are not there to be toyed with or debated over or played off one against the other. They are to be obeyed. Or to put it another way, Jesus' words are not really "heard" until they begin to work within the hearer to transform life and direct behavior. Only in the changed action of the hearer is it clear that a proper "hearing" has taken place [Brueggemann et al, p. 354].

"In spite of" faith is the direct result of living according to Jesus' teaching. "In spite of" faith comes about only from years of putting into practice what Jesus had to say. It means both hearing and doing the will

of God revealed in Jesus' life and work. That's how we wind up with an "in spite of" faith rather than strictly a "because of" faith.

Taking seriously Jesus' words will provide us with a faith that is grounded sufficiently to withstand the storms of life. Following Jesus' teaching will produce in our lives the solid foundation we need in order to have a faith that will remain steadfast and sure. It's the kind of faith we need when things invariably go south on us, nationally or individually. Then we most need to remember that on Christ the solid rock I stand; all other ground is sinking sand. All other ground is sinking sand.