

Keep the Faith!

Grace mercy and peace are yours through Jesus Christ, Amen

Has anyone ever told you to “Keep the faith!”? What do you think they mean by that, “Keep the faith”? It could be an encouragement to be strong and not back down. My brain wonders what exactly they mean by “*the faith*”? Putting the 8th Commandment in action by “putting the best construction on all things” maybe they are talking about the faith the Holy Spirit work in their hearts through the Gospel, faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin. More often than not, I get the impression they mean, “stand up for whatever it is that *you* believe in. Be strong, be tough. Keep the faith.” Sounds a bit lacking, doesn’t it?

Today we have two special events we are celebrating – things which relate to this phrase, “Keep the Faith.” Today the Church commemorates the beginning of the Lutheran Reformation. On October 31, 1517 Martin Luther posted those 95 Theses on the Castle Church door in Wittenberg. To a large degree, the world had not kept the faith; but obscured it with all kinds of false teachings and ideas about forgiveness and salvation. God brought about reformers who took a stand, bringing the truth to light once again so that the world would know the true faith.

And, this weekend, we have the Affirmation of our Youth Confirmands. Back in May they stood here before the Lord’s altar and confessed their faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior, and promised to remain faithful to God, even to the point to death. In a very real way, they promised not only to keep the faith, but to continue to grow in the truths of the Scriptures which they had been taught.

How fitting is our Gospel today for both of these. As Jesus sends out his young disciples on their first mission trip, he tells them straight up, “As you go out, you will be challenged mightily to keep the faith. However, your comfort and strength in the face of danger will be me. I will cause you to stand firm because not only am I the one who is sending you, I am with you always. Rely upon me and the power of my Word to keep the faith.”

I. In the Face of Danger (16-18)

Look at the face of danger into which Jesus sent his disciples. **I am sending you out like sheep among the wolves.** Some of those “wolves” would be their own flesh and blood, fellow Israelites, even church leaders who had already rejected Jesus as his message. Other wolves would be Gentiles, local authorities and even kings! Not every moment of every day was going to be like this, but we know for a fact that after Jesus ascended into heaven, Peter and the apostles faced fierce opposition.

The picture of being sent to the wolves is scary enough, but add to it that you are going out as a sheep. Sheep aren’t known for their courage, or sharp teeth or blazing speed. The truth is a sheep has no defense against a wolf. It can run, but it’s no match for a wolf. It almost seems hopeless from the start. To this Jesus says, **Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.** On the one hand, we are to be practically wise, sensible, thoughtful and prudent. Use the Scriptural training you have received defend yourselves against those wolves who utter the devil’s lies. Use the Word of God for Satan cannot stand it. (It’s neat to see that this is what happened for the disciples too. When they came back and reported all the good news, Jesus said that he saw Satan fall like lightning from the sky!) And along with prudent wise use of Scriptures, Jesus says, be innocent too. Don’t let anger or rudeness prevail as you are attacked. Trust in me and trust in the Word.

So, are you ready to go out and keep the faith in world full of wolves? I didn’t think I’d see hands eagerly flying up and volunteering, but consider this: just about every one of us here has had more formal training and instruction in the Word of God than those disciples did when Jesus sent them out. They had only known him for a matter of months, and you and I have been students of God’s Word for how long?

I bring up this point not to shame anyone, but to drive home the same point Jesus is making. No matter whether you are new to the Faith or a life-long believer, we will face opposition as we stand up for the truth. And our strength to stand up, our boldness to keep the faith, our courage to witness faithfully comes from Jesus! He is the one sending us – and He will be the one protecting us. That is his promise to you and me.

We see on the pages of Scripture, just how Jesus made good on that promise. Jesus emboldened Peter and John when they were dragged before the Jewish leaders and commanded not to preach of Jesus Christ. “We must obey God, rather than man!” (Acts 5:29) is how they boldly replied! In the same way, Jesus strengthened Paul again and again – as he witnessed before Jews, Gentiles, governors and kings! Jesus gave to John assurance of heaven itself

even as he was banished to the island of Patmos. Do you see the common denominator for all of these people – it's that trust and reliance upon the power of the Word of God. Jesus never failed them as they put their faith in him! This is what it means to keep the faith.

II. In the Power of God's Word (19-22)

God worked this same confidence in the heart of Luther as well when he faced fierce wolves. One event in particular comes to mind. In 1521 he was invited to the city of Worms for a debate, a diet – as it was called. The idea was that they would discuss God's Word; but instead of a dialogue, he was presented with 2 questions, "Are these your writings? Will you retract them? After praying through the night, he replied the next day that he could not. "Here I stand, God help me." God did indeed help him – and in a unique fashion! His friends arranged for his kidnapping and safe keeping in the Wartburg Castle. There, in a matter of months, his writings included the New Testament translated into German! He did this knowing it would be considered treason, but now everyone would be able to "keep the faith" as they personally could read the Bible! He kept the faith because he knew that it was right to obey God and that everyone needed to know the truth of God's Word for the salvation of their souls.

So what about you and me? Perhaps you haven't been dragged before kings and princes concerning the Word of God. Most likely you haven't been threatened with imprisonment for keeping the faith? I'm guessing most of us have not endured such a public attack – but I am most certain that we have all dealt with more subtle attacks on the Word of God. Perhaps it came from your neighbor who feels that marriage should be defined however a person wants it to be. Maybe it was that co-worker who keeps telling you that it doesn't matter what you believe, all roads lead to some sort of heaven. Possibly the challenge hit even closer to home, like in the home, in the family – and you're hesitant to speak up for the truth because it may cause ripples that will ruin both Thanksgiving and Christmas.

We shouldn't be surprised by this; Jesus tells us, **Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me.** Perhaps you haven't experienced it too that full extent, but Jesus certainly is speaking the truth, isn't he? Sometimes it's in the family where we face the fiercest resentment against God's word. How do you Keep the faith then?

Because Jesus knew that his disciples and all believers would face these challenges, he says, **But when they arrest you, do not worry about what you are to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.**

When it comes to keeping the faith and standing up for Jesus, this passage is about the most comforting passage there is! What a God we have! Yes he wants his truth to be shared no matter what but then he assures our timid souls that the Holy Spirit will be there, giving us just the words to speak. Trust him! Often that's our biggest worry, isn't it? What do I say? What if I mess up? God says trust me. My Spirit will bring to you the words... remember those words? Remember all those Bible passages we asked you to memorize? Remember your confirmation verse? Memory work wasn't about a grade – it was about life. Those are God's Words and His power; a power that converts unbelievers, a power that saves souls, a power that causes Satan to fall like lightning!

This is the case because Jesus is the Word of God in the flesh. Jesus overcame the fierceness of the cross. He endured the harshest public ridicule; he was even forsaken by his closest friends. He endured all of this to be our Savior. He kept the faith, he kept on course to win our salvation. And because he did it – we can be assured that not only are all our sins forgiven, but that he will protect and keep us safe to the end. Therefore we can use God's Word boldly and confidently.

On this festival of the Reformation, we thank God that he caused Luther to trust in the Word of God and stand firm in the face of death. Through reformers like him God restored to the world the truth of the Gospel, of free and full forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ. And on this weekend of Confirmation Affirmation, we thank God that he has taught our young men and women these same truths, and given them the bold faith to confess it – both here in church and in their lives each day.

And to all of us, as we see persecution arising and wolves of false teaching gathering, let us come together to recommit ourselves to keeping the faith – the faith that knows that our Salvation is by Grace alone through Faith alone. Stand firm in this faith, keep holding to this faith, for our Savior promises, **he who stands firm to the end will be saved.** May God the Holy Spirit keep us in this faith as we witness daily, whether before king or kin, neighbor or nephew, friend or father – for God's Word brings life and salvation. Amen.