

"By Your Faith"
July 22, 1990

Text: "Jesus turned and seeing her he said, 'Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.'"

Much of the focus of today's message is about choices. Our choices. Sometimes we make good choices and sometimes we make bad choices. The bad choices we tend to call mistakes. This reminds me of the time my wife witnessed two elderly ladies driving their car next to a construction sight in the Chicago area. The workers had just created a new lane with fresh cement and these ladies decided to put their tax dollars to work and use it. Immediately their car began to sink in the cement and in a panic they tried to back out and then move forward again. At the same time wet cement was flying, construction workers were waving their arms and shouting, and motorists passing by breathed, *"There but for the grace of God go I."* Just one example of a wrong choice; a big mistake.

In order to avoid wrong choices and big mistakes, we have, over many centuries, developed a long list of special cures and tools which can help us along. These are commonly called superstitions. In more recent years its called technology. To alter fate we knock on wood. Do you remember, *"Step on a crack and break your mother's back?"* And of course there are a series of bad luck superstitions such as, breaking a mirror, walking under a ladder, avoiding the number 13 and especially Friday the 13th. Spilled salt should be thrown over the shoulder and when our ears are burning someone is talking about us. Many people have lucky numbers and follow the horoscopes religiously. Baseball players and teams are especially notorious for being superstitious. The Minnesota Twins were the team that started waving their hats upside down when the count reached two balls and two strikes with two outs. Among other things this helped them to win the 1987 World Series, so they say. Other teams now practice this ritual.

The religious world and Christianity, as well, is not without it's share of superstitions. Remember, the cross and holy water can deter a vampire from our presence, but not kill him. For centuries, icons, statutes, Holy Mary's, and other images have remained dominate in people's lives. My oldest sister Jamie and husband Lee recently sold their house in Green Bay, though they had many months of trial and tribulation in the process. Friendly neighbors helped by burying a statue of St. Joseph in their yard. This is supposed to help sell a house. Some rules and regulations apply. St. Joseph should be buried face down, with his head pointing toward the

house, and on a specific side of the house. Jamie's neighbors buried St. Joseph in February and the house finally sold this past week.

Even our Lord's supper takes on superstitious meaning for many Christians. The elements of bread and wine (or juice) take on a magical meaning and can sometimes overshadow the more important significance of remembrance and memorial. I was a dumb protestant when I worked as a chaplain at St. Luke's Hospital here in Milwaukee and discovered during one night shift that we had run out of communion wafers. Being an industrious sort, I got a fresh supply from the cupboard and loaded them into the little dish on the altar in the chapel. At morning staff meeting I proudly reported my accomplishment to the horror of the priests on staff. The wafers I had gotten out of the bag had not been properly sanctified in a service of holy communion. The funny thing was the nuns giggled, the Lutherans started their age old argument on transubstantiation, and I sat quietly being a Congregationalist watching the uproar.

In Jesus' day there were religious superstitions as well. In today's scripture reading there are four healing stories. At least two of them deal with superstition. The first being the woman with the hemorrhage who wanted only to touch his garment. Most sources and scholars agree that she touched the fringe or tassel of his robe. This tassel was woven in a very special way and denoted power to the Jewish people and separated them from the gentile world. Many people touched the tassels of Rabbis and leaders thinking that some of their power might rub off on them. Having hemorrhaged for twelve years, this woman was ready to try anything. Maybe in the act of touching Jesus' garment she could be saved. What happened next is most outstanding. It wasn't Jesus who healed her, it was, in Jesus' words, "...*your faith [which] has made you well.*" Not some silly superstition created by human folly, but something deep inside the woman who came to Christ and was healed. Her faith has made her well.

The two blind men who followed Jesus cried out, "*Have mercy on us, Son of David.*" Using the very words "Son of David" was much like the woman touching the fringe. Maybe healing could take place if the right words were used. "Son of David" was almost magical to the Jewish people of Jesus' day and the use of such words would surely inspire the glory of God through this man Jesus. Again, Jesus puts the responsibility on the ones asking for the miracle. "*Do you believe I am able to do this?*" They said, "*Yes Lord.*" Then he touched their eyes saying, "*According to your faith be it done to you.*" Think on this for a moment. If one or both of those two had no faith or little faith, the miracle may never have happened. "*According to your faith, be it done to you.*"

Even in our day-in-age we are giving the power of our faith away to superstitions, gags, get rich quick schemes, technology, and many other

arenas. We would like our choices to have concrete results. If only we could just push the right religious buttons and make what we want happen. But then it would not mean that we had faith in God, rather it would mean we are trying to be like God. It is our choice. Last week, at Jr. High Camp, I heard an outstanding campfire service done by our very own Sr. high P.F.ers Kevin Jacobson and Wade Barth. Near the close of their presentation Wade shared this story about a young boy who lived in a village in a valley and often went to visit and learn from an old wise man who lived on the mountain. One day, the boy attempted to fool the wise man with a bird he had captured and hid behind his back. The bird was alive and very well concealed by the boy's hand when he asked the old man whether or not the bird was alive or dead. The wise man thought for a moment knowing if he answered that indeed the bird was alive, the boy would kill it and prove him wrong. If he answered that it was dead, the boy would release it to show him it was alive. So the old wise man gave the responsibility back to the boy and said, "*As you will.*"

It is time we claimed the responsibility God has given to us as faithful people. We cannot magically or superstitiously create better, healthier lives and surroundings by doing the right "things" to please God or the powers that be. Too often in my short ministry I've heard distressed people wonder, "*Maybe if I prayed harder, or went to church more often, or became a better person, God will grace me with healing and life.*" All these are good tools to strengthen a faith life, but in and of themselves do not make one believe. I remember reading a story in Rabbi Harold Kushner's book When Bad Things Happen To Good People about a young couple whose child had died and wondered if God were punishing them because they did not attend synagogue very often. No. What kind of a loving, caring God would punish the child for what the parents have done or didn't do? In a similar story, a young father who lost his baby at my first church in Peterson, Iowa blamed himself for the baby's death. He believed that God was punishing him for hunting, fishing, and trapping. Again, the answer is no. Although we make choices and sometimes mistakes that affect other people's lives, it is by our faith that we come to know and believe in God's power in our living. It is by our reliance on God alone that we are transformed from unbelief to belief and in that we receive our power. Maybe if we gave more money to the church, or were always nice to the ministers, or served on every board and committee possible without complaint then God will smile on us. Actually, not a bad precedent to set, but all that's needed to realize God's power in our lives is to have faith enough to fully rely in Him who loves us.

Earlier in Matthew Jesus tells his followers, "*...[God] makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.*" Bad things and good things happen to all people. What is different, as faithful Christians, is our ability to cope with what comes our

way in life without fancy technology or slick superstitions. We can cope with simple, believing, and powerful faith. Dr. Norman Ream drilled in us years ago in confirmation class with this accurate definition of faith. *"Faith is the choice of the most reasonable hypothesis."* Faith is the choice. Anything else would be a mistake or invalid. And faith comes from us who have confidence in God.

All of the people whom Jesus healed over time still had to face the afflictions life offers including that last great affliction of death. Even so, our faith dictates how prepared we are to face the unknown and become victors over affliction. By our faith, or according to our faith we will rise into the greater glories of God's Kingdom. And when faith is lived to it's fullest extent it becomes transformed into belief; the kind of belief we ought to have because we are heirs of the resurrection and, though distant in time, witnesses to the works of Christ. Another story of faith told by Cardinal Suens about a family whose house caught on fire in the middle of the night. All escaped to the outside safely, but the littlest boy ran back in to save his Teddy Bear which he left behind. He got his stuffed bear, but could not return the way he came because of the fire. He called from his second story bedroom window, *"Daddy, help me!"* His father called back to him *"Jump! I'll catch you."* The little boy could not see with all the smoke pouring out of the window and cried, *"Daddy, I can't jump, because I can't see you!"* At this the father responded, *"You don't need to see me. I can see you and that's all that matters."* The boy then jumped safely into his father's arms.

Many people today question the miracles, the power, the majesty, and the glory of Christ's ministry here on earth. Where the answers begin to our questions is "by our faith" in what God is offering us and believing that indeed we need to rely on nothing except him to see us through this life and to share in the everlasting power of his Kingdom. Beyond that we need not question or worry or wonder, because in him we have life. According to our faith, then, let us begin to live fully. And according to our faith let the world become witness to the modern day miracles God is still producing in our lives and the lives of other faithful believers. Its our choice. Its our faith. Amen.