

## **“Facts of Life” (Acts 2) Pentecost/Confirmation Sunday, May 23, 2010**

I remember my Confirmation as if it were yesterday. Of course, it wasn't yesterday. It was 44 years ago – Pentecost Sunday 1966. There were 11 of us confirmed, and as I look at the old black and white class picture, I can't help wondering: *Whatever became of Ron Tarquin? Or Sarah Mortensen? Or Janie Schneider?* Sometimes I even wonder: *What became of them spiritually?* You know, Confirmation is a pretty major milestone, committing your life to the Lord. For a Lutheran, it's the first “grown-up” commitment you make. And back then, our vows were pretty intense. We promised to suffer anything, even death, rather than fall away from the Christian faith. Still, some did disappear right after they were confirmed. And that's not uncommon, is it? Nor is it uncommon to fall away later, just like Jesus warned in the **Parable of the Sower**. With some, it happens when their faith is put to the test. With some, it's because their faith is **“choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures.”** And no doubt, there are other causes as well. In any case, it happens. In spite of their best intentions, in spite of their promise to the Lord, some slip, some fall, some even fall away.

Now, at this point you might expect me to shake my head and go, *“Tsk, tsk! Ain't it a shame.”* Or warn the confirmands: *“Don't even think about it!”* But please notice: I'm not doing that. Actually, I'm only bringing up the bad news in order to highlight the good news: that while human commitments do sometimes falter, God's commitment will not. And if you take away just one thing this morning, let this be it!

For let's face it. Sin is a fact of life. No two ways about it. No matter who you are or how long you've known the Lord, sin is a fact of life. Every day, we Christians fall short. Occasionally, we fall big time. For a while, we may even fall away. Human commitments do sometimes falter! But God's commitment will not. And that's what we need to remember most. *If sin is a fact of life, so is grace.* God wants us to have a personal relationship with Him, so by grace He has redeemed us and made us His own. God wants to transform us into amazing human beings, so by grace He offers us the power to change and grow. Then, once this life is over, God has even bigger plans for us. He wants us to share eternal life with Him in heaven. Everything has been taken care of. Jesus has paid the price of salvation on the cross. We don't have to earn it or deserve it, just receive it – all as a gift of grace. And what if we fall? Grace means we don't have to stay fallen. What if we fall away? Grace means we don't have to stay away. God has promised us forgiveness. God has promised the power of His Spirit. Most of all God has promised that **“neither death, nor life...nor anything in all creation will be able to separate us from” His love, “in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** God has promised that. God has made us that commitment. And God's commitment will not falter. So if ours does, we need not stay stuck in our mess. There is still hope. There is still help. We can still move beyond our mistakes. We just have to decide which fact of life we will cling to – the fact of sin or the fact of cancelled sin; the good news that God saves us from sin for abundant lives – all by the power of grace!

Now, this good news has always been the heart of Christianity. Also its greatest attraction – that instead of having to work our way to heaven, we are saved by grace

through faith. Yet ironically, as comforting as grace should be, it's a tough concept to grasp – even after we're saved; especially after we're saved! I mean, it's tough enough to grasp that God would forgive sinners at all, but what's really tough to grasp is that even when we've been saved, even when we should know better, even when gratitude should compel us to live the way God wants, still we keep sinning and sinning, and still God keeps forgiving and forgiving. That's tough to grasp – true as it is! And I suspect it always has been.

For instance, think back to the day of Pentecost. When the crowd learned that they had crucified the very Messiah they'd been waiting for and that God had raised Him from the dead, they were **“cut to the heart!”** That wasn't the kind of thing God would just let slide! So, terrified of God's punishment, they asked Peter and the disciples, **“What then shall we do?”**

But the answer was not what they expected. Instead of judgment, they were offered mercy. Instead of punishment, they were offered this opportunity: **“Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you too will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.”** Well, these folks didn't have to be told twice. They jumped at this offer! By the end of the day, three thousand were baptized.

But of these 3,000, do you suppose every single one stayed absolutely faithful? Not likely. We know human nature better than that! And fortunately, so does God! That's why He's made provision for us when we slip and fall and even fall away. Not just one-time forgiveness but on-going forgiveness. Not just one-time renewal but repeated renewal. Not just grace up front but grace every step of the way from here to eternity! Hard as it is to grasp, that is God's commitment to us – and especially when *our* commitment falters, how we need to know and trust that God's commitment will not!

So just to see this fact more clearly, let's use our imaginations for a moment. Let's imagine that one of those baptized on Pentecost did slip and fall; in fact, that he fell big time and even fell away. But imagine, too, that one day this guy just happens to run into the Apostle Peter. Talk about awkward! Peter's the last person this guy wants to meet. But there's no turning and running. Peter has seen him, so the guy realizes he's got to at least say “hi.” All he can hope is that Peter won't have time to chat...or to ask questions.

But no such luck! Peter does have time to chat, and not being the subtle type, Peter cuts to the chase: *“Why haven't I seen you at our house church lately? Is everything okay?”* *“Oh sure,”* he says, *“I'm fine.”* But Peter isn't convinced. The guy's body language gives him away. *“You're fine...except for what?”* Peter asks. The guy stammers a bit, thinking: *What am I going to tell him? I can't lie. He'll see right through me. But there's no way I'm going to tell him the truth, either. It would be bad enough if I had done these things before I came to the Lord, but doing them now – now that I know*

*better, now that I know what a price Jesus paid for my sins – well, how do I tell Peter I threw away my salvation knowing full well I was doing something wrong?*

Then it dawns on the guy: *Maybe I'll distract Peter with a theological question.* So the guy says, *“Peter, there’s something I have been wondering about ever since I was baptized. You said that I would receive the Holy Spirit, but when is that supposed to happen?”* *“It already has happened,”* Peter tells him. *“But how can that be? If I had the Holy Spirit, wouldn’t my thoughts, words, and deeds be completely different? Wouldn’t I be just as holy as you?”* Peter laughs. *“Believe me, you’re already just as holy as I am! But that’s not saying much!”* The guy stares in disbelief. *“What do you mean?”* *“Son,”* Peter says, *“I am a sinner just like everyone else. Fortunately, I’m a forgiven sinner, but a sinner all the same. And as for thoughts, words, and deeds becoming different – yes, that does happen...some...over time. But it’s a process. Spiritual growth is a process. And it’s a painfully slow process, full of slips and falls.”* *“Really?”* the guy asks. *“Really!”* Peter answers. *“And do you know what’s the worst part? Right when I think I’m doing well – boom, I’m tempted to do something I know is wrong, and I go ahead and do it anyway! Can you imagine? Even though I know better! Even though I know what a price Jesus paid for my sins! I just go ahead and do it anyway. So you see? I’m not so holy. I’ve got a long way to go. And I’m just grateful I can count on forgiveness and the power of the Spirit to do better next time.”*

Well, this gives the guy a lot to chew on! *Who would have thought? Peter himself a sinner – like me! Why, he’s even caved into temptation – like me! Yet, he doesn’t feel like he’s thrown away his salvation. He trusts God’s forgiveness all the same. And as for the Holy Spirit... Wait a minute! He didn’t answer my question!*

So the guy asks again, *“If I had the Holy Spirit, why wouldn’t my thoughts, words, and deeds be different? I’d expect the Spirit to take over and just make everything different. After all, He is God!”* *“Yes,”* Peter answers, *“He is God. But God has given you a will of your own, remember, and He will not make you do anything against your will. This is something every Christian needs to understand! It’s one thing to receive the Spirit. It’s a very different thing to be led by the Spirit. That has to be your choice. To be sure, once the Spirit is working inside you, He will do everything possible to encourage the right thoughts, words, and deeds – but the Spirit will only make you different if you let Him...and only to the degree that you let Him.”*

So the guy asks, *“What would happen if I resisted the Holy Spirit? I’m just asking theoretically, of course, but what if I did choose to think, say, or do things I knew were wrong?”* *“Well,”* Peter says, *“speaking from my own experience, I’d expect the Spirit to make you feel very uncomfortable inside. That’s called ‘feeling convicted.’ And that’s one of the Spirit’s jobs – convicting us of sin.”* The guy thinks to himself: *I sure know how that feels!* *“But,”* Peter adds, *“the Spirit also reminds us of the good news – that even though we’ve sinned, we don’t have to stay stuck in our sin. God offers forgiveness and the power to do better next time.”*

Well, after talking like this for a while, the guy finally admits what Peter has suspected all along: *"I've really messed up. You have no idea how badly I've messed up. It doesn't seem possible that God could give me another chance!"* "Doesn't it?" Peter asks wistfully. *"I don't know what you've done, but do you know what I've done? I've betrayed the Lord. I've denied even knowing Him. Still, He's forgiven me. And He's offered me another chance. That's how grace works – for me and for you."* "No matter how big the sin?" he asks "No matter how often I fall?" Peter looks him straight in the eye: *"Every sin you've ever committed or ever will was paid in full on the cross. You are forgiven. Period! The only question is whether you will trust God's promise of forgiveness and let the Holy Spirit help you do better. **That's what it means to be a Christian.** It's not being perfect. It's admitting that you're not perfect, but trusting God's promise of forgiveness, and letting God's Spirit work inside you to make you better."* The guy mulls this over. *"Then I am still a Christian? I am still saved? Even if I've..."* "Really messed up?" Peter finishes. *"Son, if you trust Jesus' promise of forgiveness and let His Holy Spirit help you do better, you're just as much a Christian as I am!"*

The story is just imaginary, but the truth behind it is real, and what comfort, what hope this good news offers you and me: human commitments sometimes falter, but God's commitment will not. His commitment to forgive us, to transform us, to bring us through this life to our heavenly home – that's something we can count on come what may. And that's what we need to count on! For as important as it is to be serious about our commitment to God, there are too many ways we can slip up in our Christian walk; too many ways we can fall and even fall away! Sin is a fact of life. What we need to count on is the other fact of life: the fact that **"by grace you have been saved through faith."**

People sometimes wonder why we Lutheran pastors pound this message so hard. **"By grace through faith."** Maybe you confirmands also wonder. Well, when you've seen so many people struggling with guilt and shame, when you've heard so many people despair of forgiveness or eternal life, there is only one message, one promise, one hope strong enough to make a difference: **"By grace you have been saved through faith."** *In fact, even as you confirmands affirm your commitment to God, that is the commitment God will affirm to you. And believe me, that's the commitment that's going to mean the most in the years to come!* Sin may be a fact of life, but it need not define our lives. Grace is also a fact of life, and when it defines our lives, there is always reason for confidence, always reason for courage, always reason to move forward. If God is for us, who can be against us? If God is our light and salvation, whom shall we fear? God has claimed us as His own. Our sins are forgiven. Eternity is guaranteed. Plus we have the power of His Spirit to sustain us. That is God's commitment to us – the commitment He made at our Baptism – and we can count on this commitment all the way from here to eternity. For yes, human commitments do sometimes falter, but God's commitment will not. Nothing in life, nothing in death, nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord! Amen.