

Actions, Words, and Visible Faith(?)

Today's Gospel lesson reminded me of the true story of a world-famous tightrope walker in the 1860s; a Frenchman by the name of Charles Blondin. Huge crowds from Canada and America once gathered to watch him walk a tightrope some 1100 feet across Niagara Falls. They cheered as he went back and forth all day long on that tightrope, high above the roaring falls, sometimes juggling, sometimes riding a bike or a unicycle. On one of those crossings he pushed a wheelbarrow full of potatoes. It was reported that the cheer of the crowd was so loud that it actually drowned out the thunderous noise of the huge waterfall. Blondin then asked the crowd if they believed he could make that same death-defying walk with another person in the wheelbarrow. They all cheered. "*Of course you can! You're the greatest!*" To which Blondin replied, "*Excellent. Who wants to get in the wheelbarrow?*" **Not a single soul stepped forward.** They all ***boldly*** proclaimed their faith in Blondin, and yet their actions showed that they really didn't have faith in his abilities. Like it or not, but you ***can*** see faith. Actions speak louder than words.

This morning's Gospel lesson is very clear and very blunt in stating that Jesus ***saw*** the faith of the friends who brought the paralytic to Him. St. Luke also tells us in his account that these guys were so adamant about getting their friend into the presence of Jesus that they actually climbed up and dismantled the roof so that they could lower their dear friend down right in front of Jesus. ***Jesus saw their faith. The evidence of such faith was real. It was tangible.*** They knew Jesus. They believed in Jesus. They brought their friend to Jesus, and they weren't going to let crowds and roofs get in the way of being in the presence of Jesus. Such faith was ***physically*** making itself known; it was bearing good fruit. There wasn't a disconnect between faith and action. ***Their actions confessed their faith, and their faith was witnessed in their actions.***

And don't go taking the cop-out by claiming that ***ONLY*** Jesus can see faith. Folks: That's ***NOT*** what the text says! In fact, that's not what Scripture says. Granted: Only Jesus can see the hypocrite's "heart truth" (like the sinful reality of the scribes, who were thinking evil in their hearts), but make no mistake: You ***are*** known by your fruits. ***You can be accused of being a Christian.*** I know some folks don't like to hear that, but it's true. Faith is able to be witnessed. There is real and tangible evidence of faith. This Gospel lesson makes this **crystal clear.** In the case of true, living vibrant faith, there was ***no doubt; no question with the men on the roof or on the cot.*** These guys were actually "walking the walk," putting their money where their mouth was. Their faith in Jesus was bearing good and God-pleasing fruit. The evidence of their faith was on full display. Their faith wasn't seeking personal attention or glory. **Their faith was seeking Christ.** Jesus saw this faith. In fact, everyone in the room could see it. They didn't have to try and ***convince*** everyone that they really were good people who loved and trusted in

Jesus. *They showed it.* The hole in the roof was proof of their faith. The scribes, however...? The scribes may have said the right things and put on *a very convincing show, but they didn't fool Jesus.* Jesus knew the Truth. Jesus sees and knows the heart.

But that's the *difference* here. There isn't a disconnect between the confession of faith the fruits of faith. Actions do speak louder than words. *Your actions confess your faith, and your faith is witnessed in your actions.* True and living faith doesn't deal in lip-service. Faith doesn't try to put on a performance or an act. It's not a campaign sales pitch that tries to sell you on the fact that "*No, really, I am a good and faithful Christian! Trust me!*" More than a few well-known politicians are in the spotlight right now because they are really trying to convince people that they really are good Christians, *despite the fact that they boldly and unapologetically support and legislate for abortion.* Faithful priests, pastors, and bishops are calling them out (and being vilified for it too). They refuse to commune such wicked hypocrisy (and rightly so). Love of Christ cannot be content to watch others walk in the way of sin and death. I ask you: Can a faithful Christian support/condone the murder of the unborn? Can a faithful Christian condone, promote, and celebrate homosexuality? Can a faithful Christian condone, support, or promote adultery or divorce or theft or slander or covetousness or racism or any other thing that clearly flies in the face of God? Actions speak louder than words.

I'm reminded of a blurb that made the rounds on social media a few years ago when faithful Christians were beginning to be arrested for their refusal to bake wedding cakes and make floral arrangements for homosexual weddings. Not surprisingly, Facebook was *filled* with "Christian soldiers" boldly professing their faith and their willingness to go to jail for their faith. The meme (shared by Christian pastors of every denomination) said, "*Don't say that you're willing to go to jail for your faith when you're not even willing to go to church for your faith.*" *Ouch. It was true then, and it's just as true today.* Actions speak louder than words. Many a pastor, parishioner, and congregation as a whole boldly confesses faith in Immanuel—God with us—and yet when it actually comes time to fear God rather than man, sickness, or fear itself; when it comes time to actually *get in the wheelbarrow* and show up to His holy house for His divine service and His holy supper, well... you understand. Locked doors, empty pews, warm beds, and unused communion supplies speak louder than words.

But here's the thing: You are saved through faith alone in God's grace alone, which is yours because of Christ alone. Works avail you not, lest any man should boast, right? Faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone. That's it! *Okay...so why all this talk of faith that can be witnessed and seen?* Works and faith don't go together, right? **WRONG!** Works don't save you, but works and faith do go together. They are two sides of the same coin. Works don't save you, but faith

without works is dead. It's not faith at all. Faith *produces* good works. But...more on that in a minute.

I want you to look right here [the crucifix]. Here is the font and source of living, saving faith. Here is *perfect obedience of faith in God above all things*. Notice: I don't hold this up to you as an example or a prescription that you need to follow in order to get on God's good side. No! I hold this up to you as a **description**; as *irrefutable evidence of God's love for you*. Jesus Christ—very God Himself in the flesh—trusted and obeyed His heavenly Father perfectly, even though He knew full-well what the Father's plan of salvation and forgiveness entailed. *“Father, if there's any other way, take this cup of suffering from Me. But...not My will be done; Thy will be done.”* And it was. Here is the proof. Make no mistake: You are saved solely because of the faith of Christ Jesus. His perfect and unconditional faith led Him to that cross. Here is the evidence of almighty God's faith and love towards you, nailed to a cross and lifted up for all world to see.

And the greatest thing is that God *continues* to give you irrefutable and real and tangible proof of His faithfulness and love to you. God gives you real and tangible “life preservers” for your faith to hold fast to! He doesn't leave us to fend for ourselves while we make our way through this dark and shadowy valley of death and despair. *“Take and eat. Take and drink. This is My body. This is My blood.”* Folks: This is **EXACTLY** what He says it is! Your “faith” may doubt or reject this, either out of fear or pride or ignorance (or all of the above) but that doesn't mean that you're right. **When our Lord says, “This is...,” IT IS!** Faith simply holds fast to Him and His Word/Promise. *“Fear not, for I am with you always.” “Lord, to whom shall we go? Where else would we be? You have the Words of eternal life.”* Those aren't just words. ***Your actions confess your faith, and your faith is witnessed in your actions.***

God is faithful and true and just. True saving faith holds fast to Christ. *“We must fear God more than man.”* And when saving faith holds fast to all this ***divine evidence of God's unconditional faith and love and grace and mercy for you***, this is when your faith **can't help but respond** by bearing good and God-pleasing fruits, no different than the good fruit tree will naturally and effortlessly bear good fruit. True and saving faith ***naturally and effortlessly*** produces good and God-pleasing works. There's nothing contrived about it at all. God-pleasing works are nothing more than a ***reflex-response*** to God's free gift and unmerited gift of justification, which is ours in Christ alone and because of Christ alone. And—yes—such faith *is* witnessed in something as simple as getting out of bed and showing up to be in Christ's presence. Saving faith wants nothing more than to be where Jesus is at, giving out His gifts of grace, mercy, and peace. Those friends of the paralytic didn't let huge crowds or fears or anxieties ***or even a roof***

stand in their way of being in Christ's presence. *What stands in your way?*
God knows the Truth. You can't fool Him.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ: I know all this talk of faith that is able to be witnessed in action may have some of you rattled. Some of you may even be offended or angry because the Good Physician has put His finger directly into your sinful wound. He doesn't do this to hurt you, but to heal you. To all of you, I point you to the certainty that is His cross and His sacraments. "*Take heart. Your sins are forgiven,*" in Christ alone and because of Christ alone. **Here's the proof.**

May this Gospel light shine in you and through you (and never in spite of you). May it bear good and God-pleasing fruit *always*, in all circumstances, all places, all times. Let there be no doubt; no question. May your faith in this *justifying Christocentric reality* ever and always be witnessed in all that you say, think, and do; a faith that is always bearing the good fruits of humble thankfulness, unashamed, unafraid, and on full display for all the world to see.

To Christ alone be all the glory, praise, and thanksgiving.

AMEN