

“DEVELOPING A STRONG FAITH” – A Sermon by Rt. Bradley D. Heinrichs

LESSON 1 – Matthew 14:24-33.

24 And the ship was already in the midst of the sea, tossed about by the waves, for the wind was contrary.

25 And in the fourth watch of the night, Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea.

26 And the disciples seeing Him walking on the sea, were disturbed, saying, It is a phantom; and they cried out from fear.

27 But straightway Jesus spoke to them, saying, Have confidence; I am; be not afraid.

28 And Peter answering Him, said, Lord, if Thou art, order me to come to Thee on the waters.

29 And He said, Come; and Peter stepping down from the ship, walked on the waters, to come to Jesus.

30 But looking at the strong wind, he feared, and beginning to sink, he cried out, saying, Lord, save me.

31 And straightway Jesus stretching out the hand, took hold of him, and says to him, O thou of little faith, Why didst thou doubt?...

33 And they who were in the ship, coming, worshiped Him saying, Truly, Thou art the Son of God.

LESSON 2 – Matthew 16:13-18.

13 And Jesus, coming into the coasts of the Caesarea Philippi, asked His disciples, saying, Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?

14 And they said, Some say John the Baptist; and some Elijah; and others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.

15 He says to them, But who do you say that I am?

16 And Simon Peter answering said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

17 And Jesus answering said to him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood has not revealed it to thee, but My Father who is in the heavens.

18 And I say also unto thee that thou art Peter, and on this rock “will I” build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

LESSON 2 – Mark 14:27-50 (parts)

27 And Jesus says to them, All of you shall be offended because of Me this night; for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered.

28 But after I am risen, I will go before you into Galilee.

29 But Peter said to Him, Even if all shall be offended, yet not I.

30 And Jesus says to him, Amen I say to thee that today, in this night, before the cock crow twice, thou shalt deny Me three times.

31 But he spoke more vehemently, "If I have to die with Thee, I will not deny Thee!" And they all said likewise....

42 [Then Jesus said,] "Rise, let us be going. See, My betrayer is at hand."

43 And straightway, while He yet was speaking, comes Judas, being one of the twelve, and with him a crowd of many with swords and wooden rods, from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders....

46 And they put their hands on Him, and took hold of Him....

50 Then they all forsook Him and fled.

LESSON 3 – Apocalypse Explained 443:5.

It can be seen that 'Simon,' when Peter is so named...in the Hebrew...means hearing, hearkening, and obedience....; and "the son of Jonah" signifies the truth of...good, or the faith of charity; while "rock" [petra], from which he is named Peter, signifies truth and faith, and in the contrary sense, falsity and absence of faith.

LESSON 3 – Spiritual Experiences 2474.

I was engaged in a conversation with angels about this matter and was shown by means of a comparison with the human body that faith and works relate like soul and body, works without faith being like a body without a soul, consequently like a corpse, and faith without works being like a soul having no body.

Faith occurs with much variety: faith merely by rote, faith [acquired] by learning, faith [acquired] by understanding, faith with conviction, faith with conviction from love toward the neighbor.... From this it is therefore obvious how the character develops from belief without conviction, and from belief together with conviction, and from conviction without love toward the neighbor, and from conviction having love toward the neighbor within it, consequently belief together with the works of charity.

“Then Jesus said to them, ‘All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night....’ Peter said to Him, ‘Even if all are made to stumble, yet I will not be.’

Jesus said to him, 'Assuredly, I say to you that today, even this night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times'' (Mark 14:27-30).

Out of all the disciples Peter is probably the most colorful. There is something endearing in the zest with which he states his convictions. There rarely seems to be a middle ground with Peter. Everything is black and white. All or nothing. At times he seems incredibly strong and insightful, and at other times so weak and vulnerable.

Peter we are told in the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church represents our faith. And perhaps this is why we can so readily identify with him. Sometimes his faith is strong and sure and other times weak and clouded.

For example, the time the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water and thought He was a ghost. Peter said, *"Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water"* (Matt. 14:28). So the Lord commanded him to come and at first Peter was doing just fine, walking to Jesus on the water, but as soon as the waves became a little rough, Peter lost faith and began to sink. So Jesus asked, *"O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"* (Matt. 14:31).

A telling story of how our faith can be at times. First, confident in the Lord's power to keep us afloat, but as soon as turbulent and trying situations arise, it becomes unsure of the Lord's ability to save us.

On another occasion, Jesus asked His disciples, *"Who do you say that I am?"* (Matt. 16:15). And it was Peter who answered correctly, *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."* So Jesus said, *"Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.... And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven."*

A wonderful example of how perceptive our faith can be when we go to the Word and recognize Jesus Christ as the one God of heaven and earth. It is the acknowledgment of this truth that is the rock upon which the Lord founds the Church within each one of us, and it is the acknowledgment of Jesus Christ that begins to open heaven to us. The first perception of this truth is a strong and powerful moment in the formation of our faith.

But what happened immediately after Peter had received such high praise from Jesus? Well, as the Lord was telling His disciples about how He would soon suffer many things, be killed, and rise again on the third day, Peter rebuked Him and said emphatically, ***“Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!”*** (Matt. 16:22).

And Jesus replied sharply, ***“Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.... If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me”*** (Matt. 16:23-24).

Here is a poignant illustration of how volatile and quickly changing faith can be, depending on where it is deriving its inspiration from. When Peter believed in God’s Word, the truth was revealed to him out of heaven. But when he trusted in his own assumptions and ideas of how things should be, then he plunged into in darkness and was likened to Satan.

From his own conception of truth, he thought there was a better way in which Jesus should conduct himself. He did not have faith that His Master knew what He was doing. Many times, we fall into the same trap. We hear the Lord telling us one thing, but it doesn’t sit well with us or make sense to us, so we are inclined to reject the idea and deny the truth of it.

This is when we need to remember the Lord’s words, ***“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts”*** (Isa. 55:8-9).

Then there is the story from today’s lesson. Jesus told His disciples that all of them would be made to stumble on that night. And true to form, it was Peter who boldly stated, ***“Even***

if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble” (Matt. 26:33). To which Jesus replied, *“Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.”* Unconvinced Peter responded, *“Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!”*

Again, we see that intriguing quality of faith represented, confident and sure in itself. And in this case, it was not all bluff. When Malchus, the servant of the high priest, laid his hands on Jesus, Peter drew his sword and cut off his right ear (John 18:10). However, after Jesus told Him to sheath his sword, Peter’s faith began to falter.

Peter just could not believe that the plan the Lord had laid out was the best – that He must suffer and be killed. And most likely at the heart of all his fears was the fact that He did not really believe that Jesus would rise again from the grave. Peter had acknowledged Him as the Christ, the Son of the living God, but he did not really believe at that point that *“with God all things are possible.”*

Then we see a vivid demonstration of just how fickle faith can be at times. Peter went from saying that even if he had to die for Jesus, he would not deny Him, to actually denying Him three times. Even to the point of cursing and swearing that he did not even know the man, much less did he admit that he was a follower of Him.

When we read this story, there is always a sense of sadness that we have for Peter. Here was a loyal disciple of Jesus, always near Him and asking Him questions, and yet when the “chips were down” he vehemently denied even knowing Him. What kind of conviction did that show? Where was his courage? What happened to his bravado?

But the point is that the story is not just about Peter, it is about us. It is trying to show us some of the pitfalls we encounter while trying to establish our faith.

How many of us have been faced with a similar situation. For instance, you’re a dedicated New Church person. You love to talk about the wonderful teachings contained in the

Writings, you go to Church, and believe that you really have faith. Then one day you're talking with a friend outside the Church and they ask about your religion.

Do you boldly state your beliefs about Heaven and Hell, Conjugal Love, and the Second Coming of the Lord in the Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg? Or do you stumble about and say something like, "Oh, it's a small church, you've probably never heard of it." Or do you simply try to avoid such a discussion and focus on talking about the weather.

Or how about when you're in a situation at a business party and the conversation turns to inappropriate sexual humor. Do you find a way to tactfully state that you find that kind of humor offensive? Or do you simply remain silent? Or do you join in so that they won't view you as being prudish?

It's easy to be bold and courageous in your faith when you are amongst your own – in a sense it's like preaching to the choir. But when your faith is put to the test in turbulent and uncomfortable situations, it becomes more difficult to stand up for what you believe. It is in times like these, when we can become like Peter and deny our Savior Jesus Christ, the one whom we claim to follow.

That's when we hear the crowing of our conscience and hopefully then we will reflect on the denial of our faith and like Peter feel genuine sorrow for our betrayal. The encouraging thing about Peter is that he did seem to get back on track. After Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, he valiantly spread the good news – teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. And if Christian history has it right, he did indeed end up dying for his convictions. The claim is that Peter ended up being crucified himself in Rome for refusing to stop preaching about Jesus.

So how can we develop a faith that is rock strong? One that does not crumble to the ground in the face of adversity? How can we avoid being fickle in our faith?

The answer lies in coupling it with charity and good works. The Lord is not interested in faith alone. He is interested in faith teaching us what genuine charity is and then doing it. The Writings tell us that *"knowing and understanding Divine truths does not make the church*

and form heaven with a person, but knowing, understanding, and doing” (AE 108:2). The Lord teaches this plainly in Matthew: **“He that hears these words of Mine and does them, is likened to a wise man, but he that hears and does them not, is likened to a foolish man”** (Matt. 7:24, 26). *“Those who are truly Christians know, will, and do; but those who are not truly Christians, only know”* (AE 349:12).

Think about that. True Christians know, will, and do – untrue Christians only know. Peter in his times of denial symbolizes faith separated from charity, whereas the disciple John symbolizes good works. This is why it is said in the gospels that Jesus loved John more than the rest of the disciples (John 21:20). Because the Lord is interested in what we do with the truths that we know, not simply in the fact that we know them.

The Lord wants goodness from us. The truths of faith are supposed to be the means to a good end – useful service to our neighbor – not the end in itself. And so we are told that *“truth becomes good when a person does it”* (AE 411:11). This is the rock that the Lord said He would found His Church upon – truth from good in action (AE 820:4). When the truths of our faith are lived in a life of charity and exercised in good works, then our minds are founded upon a rock that will not be moved by worldly persuasions (AE 212:2).

However, our faith is like shifting sand if it is not founded upon the Word but on our own intelligence. Our faith will crash to the ground when assailed by selfish loves and worldly philosophy, unless it is made strong by repeated application to life. The book True Christian Religion states that *“charity and faith are merely unstable mental concepts unless, when possible, they are realized in deeds and come into existence through them”* (TCR 375).

The bottom line is that our faith will be fickle and shaken like a reed in the wind, unless we live it every day. When we merely think about our faith and don’t exercise it – it will become weak, and when we are faced with adversity it will crumble and we will end up denying our Christ.

In our third lesson it outlines how our faith can vary and progress: *“faith merely by rote, faith [acquired] by learning, faith [acquired] by understanding, faith with conviction, faith with conviction from love toward the neighbor.... From this it is therefore obvious how the character develops from belief without conviction, and from belief together with conviction, and from conviction without love toward the neighbor, and from conviction having love toward the neighbor within it, consequently belief together with the works of charity”* (SE 2474).

Notice the sequence which we can probably all relate to at various times in our lives. First it is by rote, we are simply going through the motions we have learned by habit, then it becomes a real collection of knowledge of the truths we have learned, next we gain an understanding of those truths, and then we become intellectually convicted of those truths and convinced in our beliefs. At first that conviction can be without a love toward the neighbor attached to it, but eventually we come to see that our whole faith has to be about loving our neighbor and doing good to them. The final degree of our faith is when from *“conviction,... we cannot live differently than we believe”* (SE 2947).

If we regularly practice our faith, we will become Christians in the true sense of the word. By regularly exercising it and living according to the truth it teaches, it will become strong and we will not stumble. It will become a rock that cannot be moved. We will be able to declare boldly to others like Peter did, Jesus is the Christ the Son of the Living God. We will have absolute faith in the Lord’s ability to save us and lift us up out of the turbulent waters of life. We will have the confidence of David when he said:

“God only is my rock and my salvation; He is my defense; I shall not be moved. In God is my salvation and my glory; The rock of my strength, my refuge, is in God” (Psalm 62:6-7). Amen.