
'The Talk' — About Faith

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Proper 14 – Year A

In the name of the One God: Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of my favorite past-times as a Bible reader is to imagine—or reimagine—the tone of voice that Jesus uses when he makes particular comments recorded in scripture. Take the gospel reading appointed in our prayer book for Friday of this week. It immediately follows last Sunday's gospel reading about Jesus' Transfiguration alongside Moses and Elijah. As he comes down from the Mount of Transfiguration, he finds a crowd gathered around some of his other disciples. They've been trying to exorcise a demon from the child of a very distressed father—and they have been failing miserably. Now Jesus has already commented on their lack of faith, when he said:

“You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.”

So they bring him to Jesus and, as the scripture implies, the demon knows immediately that his time is up because it throws the boy into convulsions. In addition, that's when his father appeals to Jesus with this explanation:

“From childhood . . . it has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.”

“If you are able!” Jesus responds.

“If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.” Immediately the father of the child cried out, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’ (Mark 9:19-24)

Now tell me what you think! What is the tone of voice that Jesus uses, would you say, when he turns to respond to the distraught father? Do you think that he responds with the same tone of disappointment or chastisement that's implied in his earlier comment about the lack of faith of his failed disciples?

“You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you?”

Rather, could it be that he softens his tone and says to the father more compassionately, “If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.” (Mark 9:19-24)

Well—in any case, church family, that's our theme for the gospel appointed for today, for this Sabbath (Sunday) after the feast of the Transfiguration, when Jesus reaches out to his leading disciple Peter as he's sinking after walking on the water with Jesus and says:

“You of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Matthew 14:31)

Yes, faith and unbelief are our themes assigned for today. Yet as the framework for that theme, I ask you again: Do you think that Jesus addresses Peter with an implied tone of disappointment or chastisement when he reaches out to save him

from sinking in the waves? Rather, could it be that he softens his tone and says to Peter in the way that he might have responded to the distressed father: “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Distressed fathers are on my mind nowadays because—because I am one! Well, it would be more accurate to say that I am a *concerned* father. In addition, my son is not a boy but a 30-something young man. Nevertheless, even though he’s survived to the age of 30 I have a concern. And my concern is based on my identity as an African American father. For in our time we African American fathers are collectively concerned about the survival of our sons—our *black* sons; we’re concerned about their survival from boys to full, mature, and flourishing manhood. And that brings me back to our theme assigned for today. For just as Jesus has a classic talk about faith with a distressed father, and gives a classic exhortation to a brave but sinking St. Peter, so too African American fathers have a classic talk about survival with our sons who remain the focus of our concern nowadays.

Perhaps you’ve heard this term used in connection with African American fathers and our sons. It’s called, ‘The Talk,’ and nowadays it’s not just black fathers and sons but all parents of at-risk youth can have this kind of talk with all their sons and daughters as they come of age. It’s a talk about how they can survive an encounter with a hyper-anxious police officer in a way that defuses rather than aggravates a tense situation. Now here I need not go into great detail. We all know we’re living in the age of the cellphone camera and video recordings by ordinary citizens bearing witness to real life situations where our youth did not survive such encounters. It’s in that context that our youth get to hear this kind of talk from their elders:

Be polite. Don’t antagonize. And, always, make sure they can see your hands.

[\(http://www.pressherald.com/2016/07/17/african-american-parents-say-the-talk-is-a-life-and-death-matter/\)](http://www.pressherald.com/2016/07/17/african-american-parents-say-the-talk-is-a-life-and-death-matter/)

And here’s another variation:

If you are stopped by an officer while you are on the street, keep your hands visible. Don’t say anything besides “yes” and “no.” Be compliant. Be polite.

[\(http://www.salon.com/2017/02/20/a-matter-of-survival-the-talk-is-a-conversation-about-parents-kids-and-police/\)](http://www.salon.com/2017/02/20/a-matter-of-survival-the-talk-is-a-conversation-about-parents-kids-and-police/)

Now the scriptures I highlighted for this week and for today are about another kind of Talk: a talk about faith, about whether our children will survive with *faith*, and about whether we ourselves are people of “little faith” or rather of great faith. That’s the kind of talk that Jesus insists upon in our gospel readings this week, a talk with parents and their generation—and a talk about themselves as well as about us. Yes, it’s also a talk that Jesus would have with those of us here today who represent and support our young people, with all of us here today in morning services as we prepare to baptize new Christians into our faith tradition.

Now here too there can be concern, as to whether those we baptize will go on to have faith, to become people of faith as we commit to be for them and with them. There’s a question, we might readily acknowledge, whether we ourselves are sufficiently faithful or rather too often ‘of little faith.’ It’s in that connection that a French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, coined the terms first and second naiveté.

By first naiveté, he meant the belief system we’re all born with: the naïve belief that magical and fantastic things can happen that defy the laws of nature and that can occur outside the facts of cause and effect. You know what I mean: as children we have the magical belief that horses can fly, or that we can lift a chair just by thinking about it or—to take today’s gospel story, that people can walk on water. So as children, we come into the world with the sense of the magical possibility of things. We don’t yet have a very clear understanding of cause and effect. We’re not yet imbued the reflex habit of separating fact from fantasy. We come believing that magical and wondrous things can happen; that marvels can happen. We have a kind of mythic consciousness, it’s called; where we believe that things can happen that don’t require cause and effect—that transcend cause and effect.

But sooner or later, we are taught the hard facts of the real world in order to keep us safe—right? In order that we can survive childhood, slowly but surely our elders, our teachers and communities have to tell us that there’s a world of fact instead of fiction—of fact versus fantasy; that there’s a world where, if you don’t observe the laws of cause and effect you can be injured; you can harm yourself. So they talk to us about survival: if you touch this you’ll get burned, if you move over there you might fall and injure yourself irreparably.

So our children we must now begin paying better attention: attention to the fact that the world we live in is a world where there are these laws of motion, and principles of physical contact. And there can be harm or danger depending on how well you pay attention to these empirical or fact-based rules and laws. That's the kind of talk we have as we begin to teach our children empirical wisdom, beyond the magical consciousness that they come into the world with.

But then as we go on with nurturing them we see that they also need more than consciousness of facts and the laws of nature; of how things work in the real world, whether that's the world of nature or the world of corporations, of systems, of governments, and business. We also want them to have more spiritual resource than you can get just by observing the laws of nature or the rules that govern politics, business and commerce, government and the rule of law. We want them to have something that transcends all of that.

That transcendence is the kind of talk that our Lord gives in the gospel today, that with faith 'all things are possible.' What kinds of things?—transcendence things, transformation things, transfiguration things. Here we are in the domain of life-changing things: that your life can go from being dejected and distressed to being elevated and transformed as powerful people of faith and belief, and that we even have the ability to reach out and help restore others to health of mind and spirit; releasing others from distressed captivity to other spirits who are unwholesome and harmful to them.

This is a second naïveté where we can belong to that kind of community, where every sort of change will become possible for us based on transformation; transcending even the laws of nature as our Lord demonstrated in his miraculous powers and practices.

Will our children and their children have that kind of faith? Will these children that we baptize here at the Cathedral today be nurtured in that kind of community? That's the talk our Lord wants to have with us first, so that we can have that same kind of talk with our children, and also with our peers, with our superiors, and with our followers. Where are we on this spectrum of faith? Are we of little faith, or are we heirs of great faith—the faith our Lord gives us as his followers; *His* faith, not ours to achieve but rather to receive as a gift from him: the faith *of* Jesus as the scripture more literally says rather than the work of achieving faith *in* Jesus (Romans 3:22, 26; and Galatians 2:16; 3:22). For as declared in today's reading from Romans (10:87), faith is a right relationship with God that comes simply by confessing with one's mouth and believing in one's heart:

"The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim).*

Having learned our practical wisdom, how do we return to matters of faith that transcend all that? That's the talk we are having here today. It's the talk we have awaiting us throughout the day, rising in the morning; figuring out how we're navigating ordinary, everyday reality; pragmatically, in a way that will keep us and those around us safe. But then, where is there more than that; what is the more that we're yearning for, and that all around us others are yearning for: transformation, transfiguration, the glory of God made real here and now?

That's the talk our Lord is having with us here today. Let us have that talk with ourselves, and with those in our care. Let us have that talk to the honor of God, and for the glory that we enter into by following after God.

In the name of the One God: Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

* **Romans 10:5-10**

10:5 Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that "the person who does these things will live by them."

10:6 But the righteousness that comes from faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down)

10:7 "or 'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).

10:8 But what does it say? "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim);

10:9 because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

10:10 For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.

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