

“Finding A Faith That Works”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

March 28, 2004

Text: “Jesus answered them, ‘Have faith in God’” (Mark 11:22).

Several weekends ago my daughter Lucy and I visited New York City after I had finished a week’s seminar at Princeton Seminary. One of the plays we saw was the play “Fiddler On the Roof”--a play that had been on Broadway some years ago and has now been revived. I was struck by the great irony of the play. On the one hand it is a fun filled show with familiar music and family dynamics that are timeless. On the other hand there is a tragic note that underlies the play. The setting of the play is Russia in the early part of the Twentieth Century. As the communists come to power, the Jews of the city of Anatevka are forced to sell their houses and leave their homeland. It is an ancient story that has been acted out for thousands of years, as this determined group of people has faced programs, holocausts, and persecutions and has somehow managed to survive for all these years.

At the beginning of the play--when the great patriarch Tevye ponders how a people can keep their balance in such a tumultuous time--he answers his own question with a rip-roaring version of the familiar song Tradition." Certainly tradition has its place, but I could not help but think that it wasn't just tradition. It was faith as well.

I.

There is a saying in Mark's gospel that has puzzled me for some time. Mark tells us that the day after Jesus had entered into Jerusalem and had cleansed the temple, he saw a fig tree that had not borne fruit. According to Mark's gospel Jesus said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again"(Mark 11:12).

Now scholars have never been quite certain as to what the incident of the "Cursing of the Fig Tree" was about. After all, it was not the season for figs. So how could Jesus get angry at a tree that had not borne fruit, when it wasn't the season for fruit? Many suggestions have been made about this text. Some believe that Jesus was really referring to the sterile religion of his day with the moneychangers taking advantage of people and the sacrificial system with all its corruption and greed.

But Mark sees something different here. On the next day when the disciples see that the tree has now withered, they remark to Jesus that the tree has withered and died. This becomes the occasion for Jesus to speak not about a dead tree but about a live faith and that is where I want to focus today.

I.

Now, faith is essential to all views of life. Everyone has it; no one is without it. It is as unavoidable as the air we breathe.

But faith is also essential for the Christian view of life as well. Throughout the New Testament "faith" is a central part of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for." writes the author of Hebrews, "the promise of things not seen."(Hebrew 11:1).

"Your faith has made you well"(Matthew 9:22).

"Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ"(Romans 5:1).

"So then, faith, hope and love. These three abide." (I Corinthians 13: 13).

"Faith is the Victory that overcomes the world" (I John 5:4).

In all these passages there is a note of assurance, active commitment, and resolute conquest. In a time in which so many people are frightened--frightened for our nation--frightened

for our communities--frightened for our families and for ourselves--surely we ought to look at these words that Jesus uttered before he began this journey that would take him to a cross. "Have faith in God," he told his disciples.

II.

One of the central characteristics about faith in God is the conviction that the things that *ought* to be done *can* be done. I think that statement is fundamental to whether a person believes in God or not. Sometimes we stand in worship and say the words of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in God the father almighty, maker of heaven and earth." And yet we do not live as if those words were true. Throughout the Old and New Testament as well as through the history of the church there have always been those individuals who believed that if something *ought* to be done, it *could* be done. When Moses stood before the Pharaoh of Egypt and demanded that the Israelites be allowed to return to their homes, it was his faith in God that allowed him to say that. Or when the great Isaiah of the exile prophesied that the people of Israel would one day return to the homeland, it was out of sense of faith that what *ought* to be done *could* be done.

One of the most remarkable heroes of the early church was a man by the name of Telemachus, who lived in the Fourth Century A.D. Telemachus lived for a number of years in the desert, attempting to be close to God. One day Telemachus decided that he could not serve God in the desert. So he went to Rome. In those days the official religion of the Roman Empire was Christianity. But when Telemachus arrived in Rome, he saw something that was repulsive to him. The games were being held in the arena and hundreds of men were being slaughtering.

Telemachus found his way to the arena. There were eighty thousand people there. As two of the gladiators were preparing to fight to the death, Telemachus left his place in the stands and stood between them. The crowd roared in protest. "Let the games continue," shouted the crowd. One of the gladiators pushed Telemachus to the side, but he returned to stand between them. Finally, the commander of the games was so irritated by this interruption that he gave the order for the gladiators to dispatch Telemachus. So, one of the gladiators pulled his sword and killed him.

Suddenly the crowd became silent. They were shocked that a holy man should have been killed in such a way. Suddenly there was a mass realization of what this killing was. The games ended that day and never began again. By his death Telemachus had ended them. Telemachus believed that if something *ought* to be done, it *could* be done.

That is what Jesus did. At the time in which the cruelest tortures were hanging over him, the shadow of an imminent tragedy was lying across his life, and the whole known world was in the grip of tyranny, he prayed, "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." That is what faith in God meant to Christ. What *ought* to be done, *can* be done.

III.

Then, too, as we prepare to come next Sunday to the beginning of another Holy Week, there is this. If we are going to have a faith that works, we are going to need the conviction that the reality of God's grace is more powerful than the power of human sin. Anyone who has seen Mel Gibson's movie "The Passion of the Christ" is aware of one thing. Jesus understood the reality of sin. In him was the fulfillment of those words spoken so long ago by Isaiah: "He was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities and on him are the stripes by which we are all healed" (Isaiah 53).

This past week someone shared with me a powerful book by James S. Hirsch, entitled *Two Souls Indivisible*. It is the story of the friendship of two men who were prisoners of war during the Viet Nam conflict: Fred Cherry and Porter Halyburton. Both of these men were imprisoned in the North Vietnamese prison camp known as the "Zoo." Major Fred Cherry was the first black officer captured by the North Vietnamese. He is believed to be the only tortured POW who never disclosed more than his name, rank and serial number (a portrait of Cherry still hangs predominantly in the Pentagon). The other man was Lieutenant Porter Halyburton, a young Navy flier from the south who had grown up in the Deep South and who had graduated from Davidson College. The North Vietnamese put these two prisoners in the same cell believing that the racial differences between them would break them apart. But the North Vietnamese could have never predicted was that these two men would come to be great friends and that as Porter Halyburton helped to heal the wounds of this young black man, Fred Cherry in turn taught him something about strength, courage, and humility. Both of these men survived those years in prison camp and each man credits the other with saving his life.

There are many tragic faces that make up that last week in Jesus' life, but one of them wasn't Jesus. Pilate was tragic with all his cynicism, faithlessness, and lack of any moral courage. "What is truth?," he asked. Herod with all his selfishness, ruthlessness, greed-willing to barter his soul for his political ambition. He was a tragic figure. And Judas--he sold his best friend for gain. He was tragic. But the one there who was not tragic was the one who in the midst of the most difficult situation imaginable believed that what *ought* to be done *could* be done and who believed that there was something more powerful than pain, violence, and suffering and that was the love of God from which not even death itself could separate Jesus from.

His was not a tragic life. To the contrary—the story of his life, death, and resurrection is the greatest story ever told! Amen.