

A CHRISTIAN FAITH IS SENSITIVE & HUMBLE

Dear Friends in Christ,

In the year 1693, Jacob Ammann led a religious movement which brought about a split in the Protestant Church of Switzerland. Jacob Ammann and his followers taught a very strict, very rigid form of religious practice and they found themselves at odds with the church. So in 1720 many of Ammann's followers left Switzerland for New World America where they thought they could practice their religion openly and without persecution.

Followers of Jacob Ammann settled in Pennsylvania where their descendants live today. Followers of Jacob Ammann are the Amish sect of Christians who live and farm in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Iowa and even in parts of Wisconsin. The Amish are a distinct people. They avoid modern machinery like cars, trucks and tractors. They use "horse drawn" farm equipment, old-fashioned hand tools, and they travel in buggies and carriages pulled by horses.

The Amish lead a simple life without modern conveniences, and they dress distinctly. They wear plain and simple clothing, nothing fancy. Their clothing colors are either black or blue or sometimes white. The men do not shave their beards and the women wear a distinctive white hat or bonnet. Recent reality shows on TV like *Breaking Amish*, and *Amish Mafia*, and *Breaking Amish, L.A.* make the distinctions between the Amish and the rest of society very clear. The Amish dress in such a way that there's no mistaking them on sight. It's obvious who they are. Their religious beliefs and practices require them to be different, outwardly different, noticeably different.

It's not that way with us, though, is it? I mean looking around this morning I don't see any special uniform of the faith. I see a lot more colors than blue and black and white. There is no distinctive WELS dress code which separates us from the rest of society, is there? There's no rigid code of rules involving OUR lifestyle, right? So how does the fact that you are a believer show itself to others? It does show itself, doesn't it? The Bible says that what you believe will be evident in your life by how you live. Jesus explains to us today that a Christian faith is sensitive and humble, that is, sensitive when it comes to the thoughts and feelings of others, and humble when it comes to yourself.

Jesus begins these verses by talking about sin. Why sin? Because you need to understand sin before you can really understand grace. You need to understand your sin before you can really understand God's grace and God's gift of faith to you. ¹ *Jesus said to his disciples: "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come . . ." It is inevitable. Why? Because all people are sinful from birth and all people commit sins daily. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23 NIV).*

Sin is each and every violation of God's holy will, and sin is serious. Left to ourselves, sin would doom us. No matter how hard we try, we could never measure up to God's standards of perfection. But we are not left to ourselves. The same God whose justice demands punishment for your sins, that same God provided his only begotten Son Jesus to bear the punishment of your sins. The same God whose holiness demands that you be perfect, that same God credits you with the perfect, sinless life of his only begotten Son Jesus the moment you come to faith in him. Whoever believes in Jesus, the only-begotten Son, will not perish but have everlasting life.

So it is NOT how you live your life on this earth that secures you a place in heaven. That would be a terrible and impossible burden to bear. You are saved through faith in Jesus. And you can show your thankfulness to Jesus. You can show your love for Jesus. You can gratefully respond to God's gift of faith by the way you live your life. Jesus said, *"If you love me, you will obey what I command. (John 14:15 NIV).* That's what we mean by "a life of

faith.” A life that reflects your love for Jesus, a life that strives to conform to God’s will . . . even if it means NON-CONFORMANCE to the standards of this world.

But it isn’t easy. Even though you are a believer in Jesus, even though you are assured of salvation through faith in Jesus, you still possess a sinful nature. You are still subject to weakness and temptation. That’s what Jesus means when he says, *“Things that cause people to sin are bound to come . . .”* It’s inevitable. But it doesn’t mean you’re done for. As a believer, you live in a state of “forgiveness.” And as a believer you can daily turn to God’s Word and get the strength and the desire to change . . . change for the better.

That’s what the remainder of Jesus’ message today is all about. A life of faith, lived out of love for Jesus, will be sensitive when it comes to others and humble when it comes to yourself. A sensitive life of faith avoids offending others. Jesus says, “Don’t cause someone to stumble.” As a believer, you need to be aware of the weaknesses of fellow Christians and those who are not yet in the household of faith. This is a sobering thought. Some unguarded word, some thoughtless deed could harm the faith of a fellow believer or hinder an unbeliever from receiving the message of forgiveness in Christ.

A number of years ago (44) I met a woman who stayed away from the church of her youth for her entire adult life because of a rude comment made to her one Sunday morning. She died at the age of 93. She never set foot in church for 65 years because of what someone said to her. Now, was she over-reacting? Yes, of course! But there’s a lesson for you and me in this. A sensitive faith avoids offense to others. A sensitive faith is aware of others and their feelings not only within the family of believers but also outside. A sensitive faith seeks to greet and welcome fellow worshipers at church even when they are new or are dressed differently or aren’t used to our way of worship. We know that when a visitor to church feels unwelcomed, or snubbed or avoided they usually won’t return.

And woe to the person who causes a child to stumble in his faith. That woman, who died at the age of 93 had a son. Her son was unchurched his entire life. He died at the age of 84, probably without a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ his savior, because of a thoughtless comment made to his mother decades earlier. That one comment had an impact on two generations of lost souls.

A sensitive faith avoids saying or doing anything that causes another to stumble in his or her faith. And a sensitive faith, in return, is not easily offended. “Thin-skinned Christians” Christians who are easily offended, are oftentimes giving in to the Old Adam, the sinful nature. As my father-in-law Pastor Berg used to say, “Hurt feelings are a luxury Christians cannot afford.” Jesus tells us, “Don’t go looking for offense. Don’t feel slighted by every incident. Even if there is a legitimate wrong done to you, forgive.” Verse 4 *“If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.”*

Forgiveness is not easy. The author C.S. Lewis said, “Forgiveness is a lovely idea until YOU have someone to forgive.” Forgiveness is not easy. It takes a strong faith. At best we say, “I’ll forgive you THIS time, but don’t let it happen again!” That’s not true forgiveness. God wants us to forgive as often as we are wronged. We are told that there is *“rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents.”* (Luke 15:7 NIV). So a truly sensitive faith is thrilled to hear someone say, “I’m sorry,” and quick to respond, “I forgive you.” It is easier to forgive others if you remember how our Father in heaven has forgiven us the sins we commit over and over again.

So, on the one hand, avoid actions and words that may harm others. And on the other hand, turn around and forgive those whose actions or words harm you. That’s tough. You can’t do it on your own. You need the Holy Spirit working in you, strengthening you through the Gospel. The disciples realized this so they turned to Jesus and said, “Lord, *increase our faith!*” “If you expect us to avoid those things that harm others and forgive those things that harm us, we’re going to need a stronger faith!” They’re not talking about saving faith here. Even the smallest

faith in Jesus saves. They're talking about growing in faith, having more and more desire, more and more strength to do God's will.

Jesus replied, *"If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you."* Jesus is saying that even a small, genuine faith (he compares it to a mustard seed - one of the smallest seeds), even a small faith has enough power to accomplish what you think is impossible. Use the faith you have. A genuine faith will produce fruits of faith. Jesus says, "Your genuine faith will accomplish things which don't seem possible to human reason . . . like a mulberry tree growing and flourishing in salt water. That's a picture of what happened with these disciples and their mustard seed faith. The Kingdom of God is Christ's rule in the hearts of believers.

Through the disciples' faithful efforts, the Kingdom of God was transplanted roots, trunk, branches and all from the fertile soil of the Israelite people into the Gentile world. The Gentile world was territory in which no one thought the Kingdom of God could grow and flourish. But here we are today, twigs on the great tree of faithful believers transplanted by the disciples' efforts.

A genuine faith rests on God's word and is strengthened by God's word. Jesus is challenging us to exercise our faith to accomplish even those things that look to be impossible. You have a faith that could do so much if you'd nourish it and then unleash it, if you allowed it to exercise itself in your life. You could claim victory over those things that you think are unconquerable like worry, doubt, anger, fear, offense, frustration. You could do things you never thought you could do, like being a messenger of God's love to others not only in what you say but also in how you live.

And when your life produces fruits of faith, Jesus, with a little story, warns you to remain humble. A hired hand who works in the field doesn't expect his boss to fix him supper. He remembers who he is and continues to fulfill his duties. You and I are servants of a loving master. Even if you could do everything required by God, even if you could obey the 10 commandments perfectly, you could never say to God, "Now you owe me!" He would respond, "You have only done what I commanded. That's why I made you. I owe you nothing." No matter what you do. No matter how noble or self-sacrificing, you have only done your duty. There's no reason for pride or boasting. A Christian faith is a humble faith.

No, we are not like the Amish with a rigid code of dress and conduct to indicate what we believe. But we can and must show our faith in our lives. Here's a good place to start. Let your life of faith be sensitive when it comes to others and humble when it comes to yourself. Amen.