

The Third Sunday after Pentecost • June 21, 2009

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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2 Corinthians 6:1-13

“Walking by Faith: Walk the Talk”

Things aren't always as they appear to be. That's the reality behind much of what we see in the world – or what we think we see – especially when it comes to magic tricks and sleight-of-hand. What's outside the illusion can be very different from what's inside. Looking on from the audience, we might see a magician help his lovely assistant into a large, rectangular box. Closing the box's panels, the magician takes a large, gleaming blade and run it into the side of the box... and through to the other side! But has he split the woman in two, he wonders? Just to check, he opens the top panel on the box, only to see his assistant's face smiling and talking to the audience. A few moments later, box sealed and blades removed, the panels reopen and the lady walks out unharmed to great applause. And, then, on to the next trick. Intellectually, we know that the assistant was always fine, that she and the magician have spent hours and hours perfecting this illusion. But we don't know how it's done. Not all that long ago, there were a series of television specials which featured a masked magician demonstrating how tricks like these work: revealing the inner workings of the illusion to the outsiders in the audience. Something which is spectacular on the outside can be ordinary on the inside.

Our lives might be a lot like that magic box: we seek to keep up a good, if not extraordinary, outside, because the outside is how we relate to other human beings. Some people approach this pursuit in a very physical way, working out and dieting according to a regimented training schedule to develop a flawless physique. Around the world, most people like to dress well, to the best of their ability, so as to make a favorable impression on all who interact with them. (I'm pretty sure you can find mannequins of almost every shape, size, and color that help sell clothes in every nation on earth.) But the outside doesn't always match the inside, does it? We might put on a show and give an insincere smile to that coworker who we *really* don't care for, thinking they're just annoying or mean. We might come to worship and put on a righteous face while failing to think about the hymns that we're singing or the prayers that we're praying. And even our outside might not be all that great. When was the last time that you got exasperated and blew your cool, or cut somebody off on the road, or wore blue socks with black pants? They say that you shouldn't judge a book by its cover – the inside can be much more important than the outside, especially when we need to separate illusion from reality. But what happens when what's inside a book's cover isn't all that great, either?

There's a saying speaks to this discrepancy between the inside and the outside: “if you're going to talk the talk, you've got to walk the walk.” Even as Christians – or maybe, *especially* as Christians – you and I have to consider the outside and the inside. We don't always put a good, or even accurate, face on out faith. We do not always show others the self-giving and forgiving love that God has shown us. For that matter, we struggle internally, daily making choices that are inconsistent with the living of a godly life. As saints who are also sinners, we are imperfect on both the outside *and* the inside. It's not just that we don't “walk the talk” as Christians; we fail to recognize how extraordinary “the talk” actually is.

In writing this letter to the church in Corinth, Paul responded to the saddening news that some people there were being led astray by false teachers, who opposed Paul and those who brought the gospel of Jesus. Paul repeats that good news in our text today, citing the prophet Isaiah: “*In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.*” **God's favor has come to us through His Son, who gave his life on the cross so that both our outside and our inside may be**

made new, so that we may be saved from our sin. And the time for salvation is *now*. In these days between Jesus' ascension into heaven and his triumphant return to earth, God has given us this uniquely extraordinary message to share.

If we hope to communicate this message faithfully outside ourselves, to commend our faith to others, the *inside* has to change first. And God is at work, doing exactly that. The Holy Spirit is changing us day by day through His means of grace. As we read and hear God's Word in Scripture, He calls us, shaping us in ever more holy living. His work isn't flashy: there are no smoke effects or lasers or beautiful assistants to draw our attention. It might even seem mundane. He has washed us clean with ordinary water. He feeds us with ordinary bread and wine. But combined with His Word, the ordinary becomes extraordinary. Day by day, as we spend time in God's presence, He performs the miraculous; He changes what's inside our hearts and minds. Through Him, we can talk the talk – and mean it.

God's transforming work shows through outside, too, in our interactions with those around us. Like Paul, all that we do can show that "now is the favorable time" and "now is the day of salvation" in Christ. With God's extraordinary love changing us, we give witness to that love in all circumstances, good or ill. Christians should never expect to have it easy in this world. And although we who live here in America do not usually have to face outright persecution on account of our beliefs, we often feel frightened or inept when the opportunity to live out our faith arises. But as He did with His servant Paul, God empowers and enables us. He equips us with "the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left," tools for offense and defense so that what's inside us might shine through on the outside. This is our call: to walk the talk, to live out the gospel in our lives.

Our heavenly Father continues to hold us in His care in all circumstances. The same God who laid the borders of the oceans, the same God who calms the wind and wave, this is the God who walks with us. As we explore what it means to live as a Christian this summer in our "Walking by Faith" series of sermons, we'll always have to come back to this: that **God Himself walks the talk for us!** He keeps His promises, building us up in the faith that we need to journey through this life. This is the faith we share, and this is the witness we bear: *now* is the day of salvation!

Now, I still don't know how the magician's illusion of the lady in the box works – and that's fine by me. But I do know that God continues "walk the talk" to save us, both inside and out.

Amen.