

# FAITH IS THE VICTORY

## FATHER LARRY

*Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the child. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that overcomes the world – our faith. And who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God (1 John 5:1-5).*

I would like to reflect with you on one verse from our readings, 1 John 5:4, and from this one verse, just one sentence: “And this is the victory, that overcomes the world.” “This is the victory, that overcomes the world.”

To begin with remember that in the original Greek of the New Testament, “world” or “cosmos” can mean the material world or universe of beauty and wonder and goodness in which we live. The universe is itself a miracle and we are put here to wonder and marvel in appreciation. “World” or “cosmos” can mean all the people who inhabit the earth and are loved by God more than they can ever love themselves; or, as here in this verse, it can mean the unseen spiritual forces that are hostile to God, and that sometimes make life difficult, sad, or frightening for us. The world, in this last sense, is an atmosphere fouled by fear, by evil, by suffering, by pain, and tears. In the mid seventies we went to serve a church in Santa Cruz. There was a man there by the name of Walt Ayers. Walt had never done much of anything that was terribly exciting or adventuresome in his life. He had never traveled, and I think he had to quit high school, to help on the family farm. In fact, He had worked hard, had done manual labor, all of his life – that is until his mid sixties when his arm was torn out of its socket in a work related accident. If he thought I was discouraged about things, Walt would give me a fatherly pep talk, and then he would end the conversation with a little bit of folk wisdom. He would say: “It’s a great life if you don’t weaken.” I think what Walt was saying was that life, that even the very ordinary life he had lived, is wonderful, and that he was grateful for it, but that there are forces always at work to undermine the quality, the joy, of our lives, and that sometimes make it difficult for us to keep on going on, and so we need a certain amount of vigilance, and we need to hang on to our courage and faith. This is the world Jesus was talking about when he said, “In the world you will have trouble, but be of good cheer, keep your courage up, keep on going, for I have overcome the world.” This is the world, “And this is the victory which overcomes the world, even our faith.”

So what about faith then? “Faith,” said Archie Bunker years ago on *All in the Family*, “is believing what no one in his right mind would believe otherwise.” That line worked so well and is so memorable, precisely because that is what most people think faith is – thinking something is true even if there is little, or poor evidence to support the

belief. The idea of mental assent, of belief (belief supported by reason) is, of course an integral part of faith. Christian faith does mean affirming that God is real – that there is a nonmaterial dimension to reality, that there is not simply something, but someone that transcends space and time -- that all things cohere or hold together, in Christ. Saint Paul said “God is above all things, in all things, and through all things,” and that in God “we live and move and have our being.” Faith is the mental belief that that is true. Christian faith also means believing that the Scripture is the Word of God capable of sustaining us, guiding us, nourishing us, empowering us to meet the challenges of life, igniting a light within us that never dies away. And Christian faith means believing that the Word of God, the wisdom of God, the power of God, and the light and life and love of God are all discoverable in a person – Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. Intellectually embracing the reality of God, accepting Jesus as the Christ, affirming the centrality of Scripture is faith.

But faith as imagined in Scripture is also something that is indescribable – for one thing Christian faith is beyond belief. In addition to mental assent, biblical faith means to trust completely. Do you remember the story of the man who got his pilot’s license and bought a small plane? He thought flying was a lot of fun and kept trying to get his friend to go up with him. But his friend kept saying no just the idea of flying was scary. But one day his friend relented and went flying with him. The enthusiastic pilot made sure that his friend had a smooth flight, nothing too fancy, nothing to make his friend nervous, returned to the airport and landed smoothly. Back on the ground he asked his friend, “So how was that? Wasn’t that great? Wasn’t that fun?” To which his friend replied, “It was okay, but I never did put my whole weight down.” Faith is letting all your weight down. It is trusting God, and the wisdom of God, completely. In the Latin the word for faith is *credo*, which we usually translate as “I believe,” but actually it means something more like “I give my heart to.” Think about that when we say the creed in just a moment – “I give my heart to one God, I give my heart to one Lord, Jesus Christ, I give my heart to the Holy Spirit, the giver of life, I give my heart to one holy catholic and apostolic church, I give my heart to the life of the world to come.” Isn’t that what people say when they fall in love? I give my heart. Biblically faith also means seeing everything, understanding and looking at all reality is a certain way. There is a good deal of difference in seeing things from the perspective of Louis Armstrong’s song, “It’s a Wonderful World,” and from that of Shakespeare’s character, ‘life is full of sound and fury signifying nothing.’ Saint Paul says, “I can make it through anything, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” He says, “God works for good in all things with those who love him.” In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, “You have enough trouble to worry about today, don’t be worried or anxious about the trouble that might happen tomorrow. Don’t get too anxious about what you will eat, the clothes you will wear, or even how to prolong your own life.” Do you believe all that? Do you trust it? Can you relax into it? Can you let your weight down on it? Can you look at things that way? You know, I can swim, but I never learned to swim very well. I just work way to hard at it. Paul Stooze expressed my feelings very well in a comic routine. He said, “Do you know what swimming is to me? It’s survival in the water.” He said, “I’ll do anything to stay afloat, even swallow CO<sup>2</sup> cartridges.” I think swimming is like that for me because I never really learned the very first lesson – to trust the water to hold me up and enjoy the wonderful sensation of just floating.

That's the faith that leads to victory over the world. And what is victory? Well let me tell this little story of Viktor Frankl and I think, even if you have to meditate on it a while, you will get it. Viktor Frankl was a brilliant young psychiatrist in Vienna Austria, married to a beautiful, wise and talented woman whom he loved very much. A wonderful, happy and successful life seemed to stretch out endlessly before them. But after Nazi Germany took control of Austria Frankl and his wife, and his mother and father, were rounded up and sent in crowded cattle cars to the death camp at Auschwitz. The day they arrived, his wife's birthday, was the last day he ever saw her, or his mother or father again. Except for Frankl they were each sent straight to the gas chambers. Frankl not only survived that day, but four years of what can only be described as a waking nightmare of brutality and cruelty – a living hell of violence and fear and freezing cold, and starvation and inhumane degradation. You may have seen, if you were able to bear looking at them, pictures of the Jewish inmates who were at Auschwitz when it was liberated – looking scarcely human at all. Frankl, in his book, "Man's Search for Meaning," tells how a few days after he was finally rescued he walked for miles and miles past flowering meadows. Larks rose to the sky and he could hear their joyous song. There was nothing to be seen for miles around, there was nothing but the wide earth and sky and the larks' jubilation, and the freedom of space. He stopped and looked around, and up to the sky – and then, he says, he went down on to his knees. At that moment there was little he knew of himself or of the world – he had only one sentence in mind – always the same: "I called to the Lord from my narrow prison and he answered me in the freedom of space. I called to the Lord from my narrow prison and He answered me in the freedom of space." Later Frankl could no longer remember how long he knelt there repeating that one sentence. But he said that he knew that on that day, in that hour, his life started again. And step-by-step he progressed, until he once felt full human, fully alive. That's victory.

"And this is the victory which overcomes the world, even our faith." Thanks be to God. Amen!