

Spiritually Grown and Sustainable: Faithfulness

2 Timothy 4:1-8
Matthew 21:28-32

Rev. Stephen H. Wilkins
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
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Way back, when I was a student in seminary, I started to consider something very important for ministry – how I would sign my letters. It seemed like pastors were supposed to have a closing line to their letters that set them apart, and I didn't want to be found lacking in that category. A simple “Yours truly,” or “Sincerely yours,” wouldn't do – those were just too secular, you know? It had to be something spiritual. I had seen closing lines like “In Christ,” or “In Christ's love”; or simply “Grace,” or “Peace.” The closing line, I thought, should convey something about my identity as a Christian pastor.

Finally, after months of agonizing and prayerful research and consideration (ok, maybe it wasn't really months of agonizing thought, but I did think about it for a while), I decided to use “Faithfully yours,” and “Faithfully” as my good-bye lines. As a pastor, the sense of faithfulness resonated with me – I wanted to communicate myself as someone trustworthy, someone who gives 100% to my vocation, one who was earnestly trying to be a good pastor and follower of Jesus Christ.

As you will recall, there are not nine different fruits of the Spirit, but one fruit that is comprised of nine different characteristics. We are not bearing fruit if we are only developing one, or even eight, of the characteristics; we need to be working at all of them in order to bear the fruit of the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit is Paul's way of describing what it looks like to grow into and manifest Christlikeness in our lives.

Faithfulness is part of the fruit of the Spirit. There's not a very profound or complex meaning to faithfulness. It is what it connotes: trustworthiness, persistence, loyalty, dependability, commitment. It is faithfulness that makes the disciple maintain focus on following Jesus Christ and growing into Christlikeness. Faithfulness is what helps us make it to the finish line, because life is a marathon and an endurance race, not a sprint.

To me, faithfulness is a very comforting word, because it means we don't have to be perfect. You and I can make mistakes – we will make mistakes. We can fall down, we can backslide. But if faithfulness is our pursuit, then we don't have to let our mistakes or our failures define us; we can get back up and try to move forward toward the goal of redemption, one step at a time.

When we ordain officers in the Presbyterian church, one of the questions we ask of our elders and ministers is, “*Will you be a **faithful** elder, watching over the people, providing for their worship, nurture, and service? Will you share in government and discipline, serving in governing bodies of the church, and in your ministry will you try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ?*” I love that question because it asks not, “Will you be the perfect elder...?”, but “Will you be a faithful elder...?” It's asking, not for perfection, but for the very best that we can offer. It's a question that gives us room to start over again when we make mistakes, or to take a step or two back and refocus when we go off-course.

One of my more common prayers at the beginning of the day goes something like this:

God, thank you for this day, for in it you have provided me with yet another opportunity to glorify you with my life. Help me to be faithful to that task.

Is faithfulness a goal for you? What does faithfulness look like to you?

Of course, our notion of faithfulness must take its cue from the faithfulness of God.

God, who is consistent in his being and character. God, who promises to be with us always, and who fulfills that promise every day.

The song, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," has as its biblical origin the book of Lamentations. Now, if you have ever read the book of Lamentations in the Bible, you will find it to be one of the most depressing and dark documents there is. It is a description of Jerusalem in the wake of its destruction by Babylon. All that the Israelites had cherished was laid waste, reduced to smoldering rubble. The Temple – the dwelling place of Almighty God – was no more.

In the very middle of Lamentations, the prophet Jeremiah summarizes his misery by saying, "The thought of my affliction and my suffering is wormwood and gall (that is, unthinkably bitter). My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me."

Then he turns his attention to the one thing that sustains him: "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope," he says: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning, great is your faithfulness."¹

Jeremiah knows. Jeremiah knows that God is good, and that God can be trusted. Jeremiah knows that the God who called forth a nation from Abraham and Sarah is the same God who greets Jeremiah every day. Jeremiah knows that the God who delivered Israel from Egypt is the same God who will redeem his people from Babylon. Jeremiah knows that the God who made covenant with David to send a Messiah, is the same God who will establish a new covenant with his people, writing the law on our hearts; and he will forgive the iniquity of his people and remember their sins no more.

Jeremiah knows that God is faithful.

And God calls you and me to be faithful. Not perfect – Christ has taken care of that for us – but faithful. The parables Jesus tells about the servants who are given gifts to take care of while their Master is away – the moral to those stories isn't so much the size of the return on investment, but "did you faithfully use that which you had been given in a way that will honor the Master?" The conclusion that Jesus wants all of us to come away with is the hope that God will say of us, "Well done, good and faithful servant..."

One of the keys to faithfulness is to focus on the long haul. A faithful person is not just trustworthy and dependable once or twice, but consistently, over a lifetime. Faithfulness is measured with a track record that extends not simply days or weeks or even months, but over years and years and years.

Paul's second letter to Timothy carries with it a sense of personal urgency. Paul knows that he will soon die. He wants the work that Christ has begun in him to continue in Timothy. Paul has spent years and years traveling the Mediterranean to proclaim the gospel and to establish Christian communities. It has taken incredible resolve and determination for Paul to succeed in his endeavors.

Paul was faithful as the apostle to the Gentiles. And he doesn't want his work to stop when he dies. And so he urges Timothy to faithfulness.

Paul doesn't actually use the words "faithful" or "faithfulness" in his words to Timothy.

¹ Lamentations 3:19-23 (NRSV); I assume to be more correct than not the tradition that ascribes authorship of Lamentations to Jeremiah.

Instead, he offers Timothy encouragement and instruction that, when followed diligently, will manifest faithfulness.

One key to faithfulness is to recognize the presence of Christ and the nearness of the day we will be held accountable for our life as his disciples. In the first couple of verses of the fourth chapter of 2 Timothy, Paul says this (I'm using Eugene Peterson's translation here): "I can't impress this strongly enough; God is looking over your shoulder. Christ himself is the Judge, with the final say on everyone, living and dead. He is about to break into the open with his rule..."²

I don't know about you, but I find that I am more likely to conform my thoughts and behavior to Christ when I know that Christ is with me. His presence is not only a comfort to assure me of his help; it is also a reminder that he knows our hearts, and he longs for us to conform our hearts to him.

When I am conscious of Christ's presence, I am more faithful.

So if we are conscious that our Lord is with us – and that he's watching and listening – then what do we need to do in order to be found faithful? In the instructions that Paul gives to Timothy, we are given a glimpse into what faithfulness looks like. Faithfulness entails being true to the gospel, even when it is not popular to do so; faithfulness entails dealing with others with patience and care, even as you stand firm in the gospel; faithfulness means that, no matter what others are doing, you will stay true to your calling as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Can you hear the urgency in Paul's words? The future of the gospel depends on our faithfulness!

In light of the mood in our nation over the past week, I would be remiss if I didn't try to address faithfulness in our current context. What does a faithful response to the violence in Charlottesville and the ensuing national debate and tensions look like? Of course a faithful response will include a resounding condemnation of the violence, and of the horrible racist attitudes of those who align with the KKK and the neo-Nazis and the white supremacists. And as unpopular as it is, a faithful response must acknowledge that the violence of those on the far left who are referred to as the "antifa" is also wrong. I am not in any way trying to make a moral equivalence between the two; the truth is, faithfulness will require that we not remain silent in the face of any violence or hatred.

But Christian faithfulness must go beyond condemning what is clearly wrong. Christian faithfulness must include humility that is willing to listen to those who feel the sting of injustice and systemic oppression. Christian faithfulness means more than decrying walls and barriers and divisions that create hostility – it has to include the hard work of building bridges and joining hands.

There's not a person in this room who thinks that you are a racist – certainly not in the horribly overt sense that we witnessed in Charlottesville. That doesn't mean we don't have a race problem. We just have to open our eyes – and our hearts – to recognize it.

You know, Georgetown has a LOT of wonderful events for the entire community, events that are meant to bring people together for celebration and leisure. The summer concerts in the park are a great example. And the Wooden Boat Show – I think that event is worthy of national recognition. Our Harborwalk festivals, also great times. These kinds of events bring hundreds, even thousands to our downtown for the express purpose of having fun.

But have you ever looked around and asked, "Where are all the African American or

2 2 Timothy 4:1-2, The Message

Hispanic people?” Have you ever asked, “Why aren't there any people from the minority communities at these events?”

Neither have I.

Friends, just because we don't harbor racist thoughts in the classical sense doesn't mean there isn't a problem that we need to address. Faithfulness will require honesty in addressing this. Faithfulness will require that we not settle for a situation in which the different races simply aren't fighting one another; faithfulness will require that we pursue reconciliation and unity that includes every color and language.

Here's the deal: “To not hate” is not the same thing as “to love”. Don't get me wrong – it is right and good that we cast aside all hate. But faithfulness will compel us to go farther than that. After all, Jesus didn't say that the two greatest commands are “Don't hate God, and Don't hate your neighbor,” but “LOVE God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength; and LOVE your neighbor as yourself.”

In case you couldn't tell, I have felt somewhat convicted about this over the past week. But I've felt convicted before, like two years ago when the Charleston shooting took place. This past week I knew I needed to do something to act on my convictions. Feeling bad for our nation isn't enough; I need to do something. My faith in Jesus Christ compels me.

So tomorrow morning I have a meeting with Rev. Dr. Betty Clark, the pastor of the Bethel AME Church on Broad Street. I want to see how two Christian congregations can wrestle with this together, in a way that promotes reconciliation, in a way that encourages the building of bridges, in a way that manifests the love of Jesus Christ. And assuming that Jesus doesn't come at 2:47 p.m. tomorrow afternoon, I hope that we'll be able to identify some ways we can get started.

When Paul wrote to Timothy, Paul was able to look back on his own life and find satisfaction in knowing that he had persevered and endured. He was able to say, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”³ If you want to live into the faithfulness that is included in the fruit of the Spirit, then you will want to live your life in such a way that whenever the end comes, you would be able to say just that: I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

Amen.

3 2 Timothy 4:7