

Undeterred Faithfulness, August 4th

Scripture 2 Corinthians 1: 15-20

"...I was confident of this, I planned to visit you first so that you might benefit twice. I planned to visit you on my way to Macedonia and to come back to you from Macedonia, and then to have you send me on my way to Judea. When I planned this, did I do it lightly? Or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say, "Yes, yes" and "No, no?" But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not Yes and No. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by me and Silas and Timothy, was not Yes and No but in him it has always been yes. For no matter how many promises God has made, they are Yes in Christ. and so through him the Amen is spoken by us to the glory of God."

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

And the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Faithfulness, right in the midst of the fruit cocktail, is essential. We can see this in God's character. He is faithful and because of his faithfulness we can trust every other beautiful character trait that is true of him - his love, his mercy, his promises, his patience, kindness, goodness, grace, gentleness, even his joy! In every way and for every thing that is true of him, his faithfulness is critical. The scripture we read this morning proclaims God's faithfulness and that Christ has sealed it through his life and death. Paul says, "In Christ, every promise of God is Yes and Amen!!" God says it is so, Jesus seals the promise, the Holy Spirit delivers the Yes to us and through us to others. So faithfulness is also absolutely necessary for us as well. Just think for a moment about what faithfulness makes possible in our relationships. Faithfulness gives rise to trust, to confidence, to assurance, to peace in our human relationship as well as with God.

Faithfulness here is not primarily about being faith-filled which one might assume if you parse out the word construction - full of faith. It is being one in whom others can put their faith, one who can be counted on, being steadfast, reliable, dependable, a person of your word, in it for the long haul, trustworthy and unwavering, undeterred. The opposite of this kind of faithfulness is being inconsistent, undependable, unreliable, untrustworthy, fair-weather, fickle, and flaky.

As with the other 8 listed fruit of the Spirit in Galatians, we look to Jesus. It was and is a mark of his life. In fact it is so important to Jesus that he tells his disciples four different parables about being faithful in Matthew 24 and 25. Two of them are familiar: Matthew 24:36-51 describes the faithful and wise servant who watches for the return of his master and is rewarded for his faithfulness; in 25:14-30 the parable of those to whom talents were given. The talents were invested by two servants bringing dividends and rewards for their faithfulness and trouble for the one who buried his out of fear and lack of trust. These stories and others are powerful reminders - not only is there joyful reward for those who are faithful to the important things, but surely disappointment and rejection for those whose priorities in life are skewed by selfish interest or inaction. Paul writes in 1Corinthians 4:2 "Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful."

Now to be honest, preaching on faithfulness to this crowd is truly preaching to the choir. So many of you have been incredibly faithful to this church family for years - from the music ministry, to deacons

and elders, to supporting missionaries, to the bike ministry, helping with the children, working in the Peace Garden. Whatever needs to be done, there are people who step up and carry out their responsibilities. So rather than tell you how to be faithful today, I am going to explore with you the things that can deter us from the fruit of faithfulness.

Jesus not only tells stories about faithfulness but his life is a lesson in it. We see in the record of Jesus' life, his faithfulness is tested again and again in the same ways that mirror how our faithfulness is tested.

We begin at the beginning: Jesus knew who he was and why he came. Luke 2:49 "I must be about my Father's business." In John 6:38 he affirms it: "For I have come down from Heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me." Knowing why he came and being faithful to his calling were tested throughout his life. We will look at a few examples of that testing. They have given me pause as I have pondered them. With each example I have asked myself a question and I will suggest them for you as well. Everyone of the questions has a "both and" kind of answer, a caveat which we will look at later because sometimes not everything that looks like faithfulness is truly being faithful.

Mathew 4 The first major test to be unfaithful or to abandon God's purposes and meet his own needs and desires is recorded. It came in the wilderness directly from Satan. Jesus was perhaps at his weakest having fasted for 40 day. "Abandon," taunted Satan. "Use your powers to feed yourself, to exalt yourself, to prove who you are." Jesus chose faithfulness to God's purposes! I ask myself: Do I know God's purpose for me here and now today? Am I faithful to my calling? Do you? Are you?

Then in Mark 1:38 we read that after a day of preaching and healing Jesus ends up at Peter's mother-in-law's house. All get some sleep but Jesus gets up early in the morning to pray. Although his newly minted disciples wish him to meet the expectations and needs of the village, Jesus says we need to go to other villages "...that is why I have come." His faithfulness was tested by the distractions of others' wishes, desires and needs. Jesus was faithful. What are the distractions from others that can pull me off track and send me in the wrong direction? Who can distract you? What distracts you?

Mark 6: 33 It is after his cousin John the Baptizer is beheaded and his disciples have returned from an exhilarating mission trip. Jesus attempts to find a place of rest for himself and the 12. On his arrival at the place chosen, he is confronted by a multitude of people. When he saw the 5000 plus folks as sheep without a shepherd, his heart of compassion met their need, not his own need for rest, and he fed them. His faithfulness was tested by a temptation to allow his personal plans to sidetrack Him from God's plans. I ask myself "How do I respond when my best laid plans are thwarted by the needs of others?" Am I faithful to give what is in my hand to give, serve when and where service is needed, or do I grumble and complain and claim me time, my time, my stuff?

John 6:14 - Right after feeding the 5000, His faithfulness was tested again by the temptation to short-circuit God's plans when the people want to make him King - He will be King of Kings one day after all. Why not speed things up a bit and circumvent what lies ahead? I ask myself how do I meet the temptation to run ahead of God, thinking I know what's best? Do I pray? Do I wait? Is my patience engaged as I wait on God? Do I look for an easier way?

From Mark 10: 32 and onward we see Jesus heading to Jerusalem. Knowing what lies ahead, he remains faithful. His faithfulness was tested by suffering and pain.

The question I ask myself is how do I travel through disappointment, suffering, pain, loss? Am I still faithful?

Again the faithfulness by our Savior prompts me to ask:

Am I committed to God's purposes for my life? Are there distractions that I am prone to that move me from faithfulness to God and others? How do I respond when my plans are thwarted or interrupted? Do I try to short circuit or get ahead of God? And how do I move through disappointment, suffering, pain and loss? Am I faithful?

Now the caveat - have you noticed that in our fruit of the Spirit conversations there is so often a caveat? A "Yes, but?" That is because these fruit are not laws but attitudes, motivations, character traits which are developed by the Holy Spirit for Spiritual outcomes that reflect the life of Jesus. So the caveat regarding faithfulness: not every situation calls for on-going, forever in, I can be counted on to do what you need or want me to do, even to the keeping of every promise I have made. Sometimes dogged faithfulness to a cause or commitment needs to be set aside in order for self care and/or the realistic assessment of the situation. The life of Scottish minister Robert Murray McChesney as cited by J. Oswald Sanders in "The Joy of Following Jesus" is a case in point. I quote: "He lay on his deathbed when only twenty-nine, completely worn out by his unremitting labors. To the friend sitting at his bedside, McChesney said, "The Lord gave me a horse to ride and a message to deliver. Alas, I have killed the horse and I cannot deliver the message!" Is there a faithfulness that becomes toxic? I think yes.

In our opening scripture Paul talks about a problem he had. He made a promise that he could not in good conscience keep. Paul is writing to the church in Corinth - a second letter to this divided, unhealthy church. But before he begins to write to them concerning their struggles to live out the gospel, he must clear up this broken promise. He writes about what he has been up against: " vs. 8 "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed in our hearts we felt the sentence of death." Paul had told them he would visit them hoping for two visits - and didn't make it there even once. He owns that fact. But this instance of seemingly unfaithful action doesn't mean that he treats these promises casually or minimizes the effect on those to whom the promise was made. He says there was no "yes and no" going on in his mind. Life interrupted well made plans. There was no wavering on their part, just as there isn't wavering in God's promises. What God says can be trusted! We can take his promises to the bank because Jesus has answered them all with a resounding yes!

People - you and I - make promises in good faith, meaning we have every intention and all our energy is focused on keeping them, but then things change, life happens. We discover our promise was made with good intent, but without the ability to see into the future. And we simply have to step back, step out, give up, give in, and own our inability to make good on our commitment. In humility we ask for forgiveness. It may feel to us and maybe others that we have been unfaithful. It is only wisdom that can reveal to us whether the letting go, is being unfaithful or is keeping in step with the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit's guidance that parses that decision. Jesus promised that He was sending His spirit to live within us for this very reason. We simply do not know the future, the contingencies that will arise in our health, our work, our world that must shape our actions to align with the reality we are facing. And so we are called to abide - to pitch our tent in life with Jesus, with the Spirit. I want to address what that looks like in the last message in this series on the Fruit of the Spirit at the end of August. I hope you will be with me that Sunday as we explore together.

FIND US FAITHFUL

We're pilgrims on the journey
of the narrow road,
and those who've gone before us
line the way.

cheering on the faithful,
encouraging the weary,
their lives a stirring testament
to God's sustaining grace.

O may all who come behind us
find us faithful,
may the fire of our devotion
light their way.

may the footprints that we leave,
lead them to believe,
and the lives we live
inspire them to obey.

O may all who come behind us
find us faithful.

Surrounded by so great
a cloud of witnesses,
let us run the race
not only for the prize,
but as those who've gone before us.
let us leave to those behind us,
the heritage of faithfulness
passed on thru godly lives.

After all our hopes and dreams
have come and gone,
and our children sift thru all
we've left behind,
may the clues that they discover,
and the memories they uncover,
become the light that leads them,
to the road we each must find.

O may all who come behind us find us faithful.

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Songwriters: Jon Mohr

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Amen