

First Congregational United Church of Christ
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost- October 15, 2023

Scripture lessons: Psalm 100 & Micah 7:1-7, 18-20

BECOMING MORE LIKE GOD

Faithfulness is a biblical word. It's one we don't use much in our everyday talk. What does it mean?

It's the strength of character that allows us to be loyal, dependable, and trust-worthy. It enables us to make commitments and keep them. It frees us to make promises and honor them. As St. Paul says in his letter to the Galatians, it's one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit in our lives (5:22).

Through our commitments and promises, we move beyond ourselves to create certain expectations for and with other people. Through them we establish legitimate claims upon each other. If you say to me, "You have to do this because you've made this commitment or given this promise", I can't just say, "I don't care". I can't say that without betraying myself, without violating who I've intended to be and what I've meant to do.

We can better appreciate the importance of faithfulness by trying to imagine life without it. Think of it at one of its simplest levels- the making and keeping of appointments. How often do we count on people to meet and to be with us at certain times and places?

You hire someone to work for you. They agree to arrive at a particular time each day, but they don't. You arrange to meet some friends for lunch, but they neither come nor call. Family members or fellow church folk promise to help you with a project, but fail to follow through. Even at this elementary level, it's easy to see how a lack of faithfulness can cause all sorts of needless frustration, upset, and stress.

Extend this to matters of greater range and significance and the picture gets much bleaker. It's the one that Micah paints for us in today's second Scripture. He says of Israel in his time, "The faithful have disappeared from the land . . . Put no trust in a friend, have no confidence in a loved one; guard the doors of your mouth from her who lies in your embrace (7:5-6)."

Micah puts his finger on the main problem with faithlessness. If we become careless about keeping our commitments and honoring our promises, we quickly reach a point where we can't trust each other anymore. Without trust, the bonds between us shrivel, dry up, and die.

Unfortunately, there seem to be strong currents in our culture today that subtly but actively work against faithfulness. Forces like these, I suspect, tempt us more and more into the kind of situation that Micah lamented in his day.

Reflect, for example, on the advertising that's become such a big part of our daily lives. How often do ads encourage us to favor what's new? How often do they suggest that what's "new" must therefore be "better"? How often do they promote disposables or products designed to be obsolete in a short time rather than good for the long haul? So, we have disposable plates, napkins, cups, utensils, razors, contact lenses, and diapers- to name just a very few. We have major industries like clothing, autos, computers, and electronics that rely on things wearing out or going out of fashion sooner rather than later.

The whole premise seems to be that we're better off if we can throw away and buy new. To insist on high-quality originals and to do the service and maintenance necessary to keep them for the long-term is portrayed as somehow foolish and vaguely quaint. Given that approach, it's no surprise that it seems easier now to dispose of certain human relationships, too, once their novelty, fashion, or usefulness has worn off.

Employers speak of "disposable workforces" that consist only of part-time employees who can be paid low wages and provided no benefits. Like other disposables, they can easily be tossed aside when it's felt that they're no longer needed. Or couples decide to live together rather than commit to one another in marriage. The feeling creeps in that musty old marriage forces us to make pro-mises that are artificial and unrealistic. By living together, we think we can have the best of both worlds- all the benefits of an intimate relationship without any of the risks and liabilities of a permanent commitment. If either of us wants out, it's easier if we're not married. I've been down that road.

These tendencies suggest a level of commitment to one another as human beings that goes about as deep as the average consumer's commitment to a given product. If I'm dissatisfied with or no longer feel a need for a particular employee, friend, or intimate partner, I can quickly let them go. I'm fast to move on elsewhere to find someone who's presumably better.

After all, we're Americans. We're a people who are "on the move". We're also a people who virtually idolize our individual rights. These characteristics make us wary of making and keeping significant promises to anyone.

Life in our country moves fast and people tend not to stay in one place for very long. In the midst of so much movement and restlessness, we often hear of how important it is to be true "to ourselves", since, after all, we're the ones that we're sure we'll always be with. But being "true to ourselves" in this sense mainly comes to mean that we feel an obligation to fiercely guard our personal prerogative to do what we want and when we want.

In that kind of cultural setting, why *would* anyone bind themselves deeply to anyone else? How would they or we know that any of us would be around even six months from now to follow through on our commitments? To create a strong bond with another person or group in circumstances of this sort seems to invite only heartache and disappointment.

But with such an *overemphasis* on our individual freedom, the basic meaning of faithfulness usually ends up being weirdly distorted as well. Supposedly faithful to ourselves we, in fact, often end up giving our first allegiance to our feelings or moods. Those are notoriously fickle, but we still seem to feel oddly bound to follow them.

We develop a strong aversion to doing anything that we don't "feel" like doing. Acting out of a sense of obligation starts to feel "phony", so we contend that it's more "honest" to do nothing at all than to do something "merely" out of obligation. If I don't feel like visiting my mother in the nursing home this weekend, I tell myself it's better to stay home and keep my alleged integrity than to visit her out of some dry sense of "mere" duty. That's what being faithful "to myself" comes to mean.

The meaning of faithfulness to other people also becomes badly skewed. Thinking that we, above all, must honor each other's personal prerogatives, we believe that being loyal to someone means supporting them in whatever they strongly feel or in whatever they really want to do.

Loyalty to our bosses comes to mean, for example, that we'll lie for them if that's what they want. Or we'll tell them only what they want to hear, if that's their preference. Faithfulness to our spouses or friends comes to mean that we'll cover for them if that's what they want or affirm them in whatever strikes their fancy. Calling them to account, drawing attention to their possible self-deceptions, and encouraging them to be better than they presently are- all of these seem out of the question. Acts of that sort begin to appear *disloyal*.

So, if it's true, as I believe it is, that our wider society generally discourages and distorts faithfulness in ways like that, we, as Christians, need more than ever to *dwell* on it. We need to hone in on and support each other explicitly in the practice of Christian faithfulness. We need to remind each other repeatedly of the powerful and essential reason that we have, as Christians, for making commitments and binding ourselves deeply to one another with promises that we fully intend to keep.

The reason is straightforward and profound. The God that we worship is faithful. We worship the Creator of all who makes and keeps promises and commitments to us, even when we don't. At the end of his long and sad song about faithlessness in Israel, Micah says, "But as for me, I will look to the LORD, I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me." (7: 7)

"Who is a God like you," he cries, "pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of (Your people). You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show faithfulness to Jacob and unswerving loyalty to Abraham, as You have sworn to our ancestors from the days of old (7:18-20). Or as our first Scripture from Psalm 100 puts it: "(T)he Lord is good; (the Lord's) steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations."

We have been made in this God's image. Like our Maker, we're called to be known for who we really are by the substantive promises that we make and keep. And the substance of our commitments is meant to be nothing less than the love that God is. To repeat- *the substance of our commitments is meant to be nothing less than the love that God is*. Therefore, the two areas of our lives that continue to serve as primary training grounds for our faithfulness in this love come as no surprise. They are marriage and friendship.

Marriage is one of the few places in our wider culture where lifelong promises of faithfulness are still publicly made. Those promises are often understood primarily as pledges of sexual fidelity to our spouse, which is fine and good, BUT . . . as Christians we understand married faithfulness in terms that are much broader and more radical than that.

In Christian marriage, we promise nothing less than to love our spouse as God loves them. In love, God aims to restore us fully to God's image in us. To be restored in that image means growing in all of love's virtues, the virtues that mark God's own character. In promising to love our spouses, we promise to do nothing less than grow with them in God's love.

The same commitment is at the heart of Christian friendship. The faithfulness of Christian friends is different from the sort of loyalty that's usually promoted in our larger society. Faithful to each other as Christians, we don't expect to be covered for when we do wrong. We don't expect to be supported in whatever we're doing simply because we strongly feel like doing it. Instead, we expect to be called upon to be more like God. We expect to be supported in cultivating all of love's virtues.

As Christians, we therefore commit steadily to telling each other the truth- the truth that we're meant to be like God, the truth that we're not yet so, and the truth that by God's grace and with the support of one another's faithfulness we will become more and more so.

Our faithfulness to each other makes this kind of truth-telling possible. As Christians, we don't have to walk on eggshells with one another because we know that we're committed to one another for the long haul. We don't have to coddle each other with comfortable lies because we know that bound to each other in God's love, even the hardest truths won't send us packing.

This is the faithfulness that the Holy Spirit is at work to grow in us. It's the faithfulness that all of you who have remained devoted members of this church through thick and thin have practiced and will continue to practice.

You will, as faithful Christian friends, keep striving to lay out and to face the truth of your present situation as openly, honestly, and fully as you can, no matter how much you might like it to be different.

You will, as faithful Christian friends, stay committed to enabling everyone in the church to become genuinely informed about it and to join in praying, deliberating, and deciding together on which path to the future can best help you to fulfill the ministry that God continues to give to you.

And you will, as faithful Christian friends, embrace the unique challenges of this time as an extraordinary opportunity to realize and celebrate again this marvelous gospel truth- namely, that brought and bound together in God's love, you will become more and more faithful. In the power of the Holy Spirit, you will become more and more like God. Amen!