

Faithfulness: Something We Do? Or Something We Believe?

For those of you who rely heavily on the bulletin for accurate information, I want to apologize for completely changing everything Jon worked so hard to prepare before he left on vacation.

At the time he needed texts and a sermon title for printing I was on a road trip with my cousin and when I finally had the time to sit down and reflect on the texts, I didn't want to preach on them anymore.

This is the most challenging sermon I've ever worked on.

Jon set a high bar with this sermon series on the Fruits of the Spirit. Not only do we start with a theme instead of a particular text, but we've also committed to looking at different ways the writers of scriptures understand *how* one should live by these spiritual fruits and how we navigate those tensions as we set out to apply these fruits in our own lives.

In case you've lost track of where we are in this series, the fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness FAITHFULNESS.

Part of the reason I had a hard time settling on a text is that all of my sermons are about faithfulness to one degree or another. And so are most texts in the Bible. So what can I say today that isn't so broad in general that we all go home today having simply agreed on the obvious.

Faithfulness is good, keep it up.

Part of the difficulty in tracing what "faithfulness" means throughout the Bible is that we switch languages halfway through the Bible, so we're working with two words instead of one, both of which have a wide range of meanings and carry with them the cultural significance of their day.

In Hebrew the word most commonly translating to faithfulness is *Hesed*. But depending on its context it can also translate to mercy, compassion, love and grace. Which is basically half of the Bible.

In Greek the word is *Pistos*, which doesn't make pinning down definitions any easier because in addition to "faithfulness" it is the word for "faith," "faithful," "belief," "believing" and "trustworthy."

So instead of trying to say everything about everything I want to focus in on a question we may have when the Bible calls us to faithfulness:

"Is faithfulness concerned with my actions, something I "do," or does it have more to do with the beliefs that I hold, a test of my convictions?"

The answer matters.

We have centered our lives around the words and example of Jesus and we sincerely desire that our lives and actions reflect that. But in a world with so many ideas and ways of doing things, how do we recognize when life is being done well?

Well, Jesus says "by their fruits you will recognize them" and Galatians identifies the fruits as "love joy peace patience kindness goodness faithfulness gentleness and self control."

So yes, faithfulness matters, and whether faithfulness is a measure of action or a measure of belief is a relevant question.

For those who have worked hard to navigate a modern disenchanting world, grounded in science and reason, while reading a sacred text situated within an enchanted worldview of spirits and miracles, the idea that faithfulness

may be measured by the sheer confidence in our beliefs can be really problematic.

If I can't recite the apostles creed without wincing or question the literalness of some of the biblical stories, or if I still have questions after the sermon, have I failed the faithfulness test? Is faithfulness asking me to leave my questions at the door?

What do I do with Jesus' words in Mark 16:15-16

Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

Or what about Romans 10:9?

Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

Some of our scripture writers seem to emphasize belief as a central component of Christian faithfulness.

At the same time we need to be careful not to project too much of our modern understanding of belief onto the biblical understanding of belief.

In our modern world we can talk about believing or not believing in God. Even for people of deep faith today, to identify as a Christian or an atheist are both reasonable options.

In the ancient world however, this understanding was inconceivable. There really were no atheists, everyone lived in an enchanted world of spirits and gods, the question was more, which ones?

The Romans really had no problems with Christianity as long as it could be folded into the mix of gods that already existed and give Caesar his due.

The *problem* was that Christians would not give Caesar his due.

Unlike the multitude of religious cults of the day, there was no room in Christianity to worship both God and empire. Christians lived an alternative lifestyle that subverted the authority of empire and because of *that* it was a problem.

In other words, the ancient understanding of belief had less to do with convictions than it did with *allegiance*.

Everybody already believed in the supernatural, belief was the outward reflection of *whose* you were.

Robin Meyers speaks of faithfulness as “radically embodied trust.” Modern beliefs are claims made that something is or is not the case and we have the tendency to hold beliefs as currency. “In everyday speech we refer to “getting faith,” “keeping faith,” and “losing faith” as if faith were a measurable quantity, poured in or leaking out. More is always better than less.” The more beliefs you can put in the piggy bank the better your faithfulness portfolio.

But what if faithfulness has less to do with belief and more to do with an *orientation* towards the mystery of God.

Meyers writes, “Because we trust in spite of what we cannot know, faith shares more in common with trusting than it does with believing.”

Understanding faithfulness through the attributes of allegiance and trust resonates with the way the Israelites understood *God's* faithfulness to them.

They commonly explained this relationship through the idea of covenant:

The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But

it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments.

And it is God's faithfulness that establishes what our faithfulness needs to look like. What are the fruits of the Spirit if not reflections of the character of God, in whose image we were created?

A God who was attentive to the people's cry from oppression in Egypt.
Who accompanied them with manna to eat and a cloud and pillar of fire to
guide them

Who endured their grumbling and turning to other gods
Who allowed them the freedom to have kings, even when it was not in their
best interest

Who sent prophets to plead for them to turn back to God and not mimic the
empires around them

Who mourned with them when their kingdom crumbled and they were led
into exile.

Who made a way for them to return out from exile to start over again.
Who entered into our humanity through Jesus, so that we might better
understand the way, enduring the sufferings of the human condition.
Who sent the Spirit to comfort and accompany the earliest gatherings of
believers

Who accompanies and comforts us still, because of us and in spite of us.

That. Is what faithfulness looks like.

Persistence in love

Trust to allow us to make our own choices

Faithfulness to stick around when our own choices result in pain and suffering.

Commitment to being unconditionally present with us and through us, no matter the cost.

Again in the book of Exodus:

Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with Moses and proclaimed his name, the Lord. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin

So First Mennonite, is faithfulness something you do or something you believe?

It is undoubtedly both.

Your behavior and actions will speak profoundly to your understanding of who God is and who Jesus is. And your beliefs will be what drives your actions when all your self-serving motives are stripped away.

In your daily walk, model that enduring faithfulness.

Through your commitment to support each other

Your commitment to causes and people the world deems as undeserving or "lost causes"

Through your trust in the mystery of God that proclaims love stronger than hate, hope stronger than despair, and life stronger than death.

And as far as what you are or are not certain of, be as gracious and patient with yourself as God has been with you.

The fruit you bear as you try to figure it out is no less of a witness to God's love.

Meyers concludes, *“Faith as radical trust is marked by an unearthly patience and by a deep and abiding belief that what we sow in love shall be harvested long after we are gone. Arguments over beliefs pale next to the practice of planting trees under whose shady branches we will never sit.”*

May we abide in faithfulness, and in continuing to choose that path, may the faithfulness of God continue to bless us and the world around us.