

Date: August 15, 2004

SUNDAY: Ordinary 20

SERMON: The Joy of Faithfulness

Text(s): Hebrews 11:29 - 12:2; Luke 12:49-56

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There was a college professor (not from Bowdoin, I hasten to add; nothing like this ever happens at Bowdoin, I'm sure) from a university in the Midwest. For some reason, he seemed to be at odds with his students the whole term. They either could not, or did not want to learn the material for the course. Most days they seemed bored, despite the extra effort he applied to make his lectures as interesting as possible. He just felt like he was completely out of touch with their needs or desires. So at the end of the term, the professor went to the psychology department to the office where they did psychological and aptitude testing, and he asked to take a whole battery of aptitude tests and personality inventories. When the secretary in the office expressed surprise and curiosity that a professor should want to be tested with tests that were usually given to students, he replied, "I just want to see if it's them or me."

I'm sure each of us has felt that way at times, haven't we? We all know the feelings of frustration, fatigue, and self-doubt that come when we have been trying our best to do the right thing, to do a competent job, to be faithful to our commitments and convictions, only to discover that our best efforts not only go unrewarded and unappreciated, but actually put us out of step with other people around us. And we begin to wonder whether it's them or us.

I believe that all of us have an inclination toward faithfulness built into our psyches, if not by nature, then at least by cultural training. Faithfulness to our beliefs, our commitments, our convictions is something we perceive as valuable and positive. We admire those who have strong convictions and hold to them, whose actions are consistent with their professed ideals. We say that such a person has integrity or is "walking the walk." We don't like hypocrites or quitters or

those who fold too quickly under pressure.

Yet despite our admiration for faithfulness to one's ideals or convictions or commitments, we know that such faithfulness isn't always, or even often, easy. One of the things life teaches us as we grow up and grow older is that faithfulness, whether it be faithfulness to our religious beliefs, faithfulness to our moral principles, faithfulness to our partners or spouses, or to our friends, often is difficult, and sometimes can be very costly. Admirable as it might be, faithfulness often puts us at odds with others who have different agendas and generates conflict.

Both of our lessons this morning emphasize that high cost of faithfulness. Jesus, in our Gospel lesson, says that he did not come to bring peace but division. Faithfulness to him, he says, would result in families being divided right down the middle. His claim on people calls for ultimate allegiance. One cannot pledge ultimate allegiance to Christ and ultimate allegiance to something else. Someone is going to be unhappy.

In Jesus' day, the ultimate claim on people's lives tended to come from the extended family. The family was the primary social institution, and it could be like an octopus with eight arms. It was all around and over one, and exerted its claims at every point. In our day, particularly in western culture where the extended family system has broken down to a large extent, the ultimate claim on us is more likely to come from the company we work for or the nation of which we are a citizen or the political ideology we espouse or the popular culture as defined and proclaimed by the media. But the point is the same in either case. Faithfulness to Christ is an ultimate claim on the person who follows Christ. And it is a claim that frequently carries a high cost with it— division rather than peace.

Our epistle lesson is part of the well-known "roll call of faith" chapter of the letter to the Hebrews. It is a long recital of examples from the stories of the Old Testament of women and men who were faithful to God even in the midst of trying circumstances. The author recites this

history of faithfulness for the purpose of encouraging people who themselves are going through tough times. The biblical word for faith does not refer primarily to content of belief or mental assent to some doctrinal proposition. Rather it means to be faithful to God—to trust in God’s faithfulness so profoundly that we are moved to faithful action in response.

Personally, I’ve always had rather mixed feelings toward this passage. On the one hand, having read all those old stories about Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Rahab, and the others, I recognize the truth of the writer’s claims that these were people who manifested extraordinary faithfulness through some pretty tough circumstances. So they are inspiring examples, no doubt about it.

Listen to his litany: *“What more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faithfulness conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection.”* That’s rather awe-inspiring, isn’t it? That’s not a bad catalogue of accomplishments. I don’t know about you, but I’d probably settle for a good deal less than that—like getting all our church committees coordinating their work more effectively.

If he had stopped there, everything would be fine. But he goes on: *“Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging and chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. Yet all of these, though they were commended for their*

faithfulness, did not receive what was promised.”

Whoa! Do you see what I mean when I say that I have some ambiguous feelings about this so-called “roll call of faith?” I’m not particularly looking to be sawn in two or stoned to death, are you? But that’s not the worst part. The worst part is that statement that though their faithfulness was praiseworthy, it didn’t get them anything in the end. They “did not receive what was promised.”

Then what’s the point of being faithful? Why bother? If faithfulness always seems to have a high price tag on it, if it results in tension with conflicting principles, conflicting viewpoints, conflicting behavior from business colleagues or family members, and if it doesn’t always pay off with tangible benefits, why be faithful?

We get a clue, I think, from the last verses in our passage. Immediately following this rather depressing catalogue of horrors that have been visited upon those who were faithful to God, he says, *“So then, since we’re surrounded by such a great cloud of faithful witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.”* Who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross.

We would hardly think of juxtaposing the word joy with the word cross, and we certainly wouldn’t think of linking it with that shopping list of horrors just before it, and yet, our writer does just that. Obviously, then, he means something different by “joy” than we mean when we use it. Most of the time for us, joy is the equivalent of happiness. Joy is what we feel when life is going well, when something wonderful has happened. We just scored over 1500 on our SAT’s. Our boss has just commended us for a job well-done. Our son or daughter just graduated with honors from college. Our mate says, “You’re still my

dreamboat.” That’s joy, isn’t it? Well, no, it’s not. That’s happiness or contentment or well-being, or something, but it’s not joy, at least not as we find joy described in the scriptures.

In the scriptures, joy is not primarily an emotion, though it may certainly affect our emotions. But joy is something much deeper than feelings of happiness. Joy is not necessarily related to outward circumstances or events, and can be present even when conditions are terrible. Joy springs from a deeper place within us, the place from which we apprehend God’s presence and action in our lives and in the world. As Teilhard de Chardin once said, “Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God.” Joy is always connected to something God has done, is doing, and will do in the future. Joy always has a future cast to it, unlike happiness which is much more dependent on present circumstances. Trust in God’s faithfulness to us and to the whole creation is the underlying cause for joy, and the ability to perceive and trust in God’s faithfulness, in spite of the circumstances, as St. Paul repeatedly reminds us, is the gift of the Holy Spirit. And this gift of joy makes our faithfulness possible, even in the darkest of circumstances.

It was “*for the joy that was set before him,*” that Jesus “*endured the cross.*” In other words, joy is a companion of hope. It is the foretaste of what we hope for. And that foretaste gives us the courage to be faithful, paying the price that faithfulness entails, without losing hope and giving up in the face of adversity. We may not receive what was promised in the short term; hope, and therefore, joy, are the modes of life for the long term.

In our era, we saw one of the best examples of such joyous faithfulness in the life of Mother Teresa, which is one reason she’s being fast-tracked toward sainthood in the Roman Catholic Church’s process. It’s not that Mother Teresa was always happy working in such desperate conditions among the destitute and dying of Calcutta; in fact, since her death, it’s

become clear that she often suffered from severe feelings of depression. Yet that she was a woman of joy is indisputable; it radiated from her. And it was from that deep inner wellspring of joy, that anticipation of a final state in which God’s presence would be all in all, that her ability to be faithful sprang.

We Protestants may not have officially canonized saints, but most of us have personal saints— those persons whose lives have been living examples to us of joyous faithfulness to God, often in the midst of trying circumstances.

Like that college professor who faithfully kept on trying to evoke a desire for knowledge in his students, despite their apparent indifference; or the corporate manager who is confronted by conflict between being faithful to her ethical convictions or choosing the more profitable, but unethical course of action; or those who “for the joy that is set before them,” find within themselves the grace to forgive grievous wrongs done to them by a parent or a spouse or a partner, and faithfully work for full reconciliation; or the person who in spite of chronic illness or disability or even severe pain, manages to radiate a sense of joy and faithfulness to those around them.

In the church in which I grew up, there was a man named Lester who worked in a factory that made bronze propellers for ships. He had only a high school education, and he was not what one would call a leader. He had a rather reserved and cautious personality. But he was a good and caring and faithful Christian, one of the most loving men I’ve ever had the privilege of meeting. And he radiated a quiet joy.

Lester took his faith very seriously. At the factory where he worked, as is true in many workplaces, the level of conversation was often fairly vulgar. The lunch hour particularly was often a time when the object was to see who could tell the dirtiest stories. Lester decided that this was not really a very edifying way to spend his lunch hour, but he didn’t make a big deal of it;

he simply ate his lunch at another table, often using his time to read. If he was asked by one of his co-workers why he ate alone at lunch, he would simply say that as a Christian, he felt uncomfortable with stories that were mostly degrading to women and which treated sex so profanely. Of course, this earned him the nickname of “the preacher,” and he was often the target of malicious ridicule. He knew personally that division between himself and others that Jesus spoke about. But Lester was a person of joyous faithfulness. He had tasted something “out there,” “beyond,” and that foretaste of the joy of God’s kingdom which he already knew in his experience, was enough to sustain him and encourage him in his faithfulness.

One day, one of his co-workers had a devastating personal problem, and needed desperately to talk to someone about it. To whom did he go? To his foul-mouthed and foul-minded lunchtime buddies? No, he went to Lester. He went to the one person, who by his quiet, joyous faithfulness, had earned his respect, and in whom he recognized something authentic and true.

That inner joy, that anticipatory trust in God’s ultimate faithfulness to us and to God’s world is what will sustain us in our struggles to be faithful as well. Our calling as followers of Christ is not necessarily to be successful, but to be faithful. Whether in spectacular or quiet ways, whether in circumstances of ease or in situations of conflict or trouble, whether in the public arena or in private relationships, it is by pledging our ultimate allegiance to the Kingdom of God, that we will experience the joy of the Lord welling up within us, enabling us to sing the Lord’s song, even in the darkest night.