

The Gift of Faithfulness

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
on the Fifth Sunday of Lent – March 21, 2021
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
Text: 1 Corinthians 1:4-10

My gift of faith came to me from my mother. Of this I have no doubt. I also have no memory of a time when I didn't know who God was, no memory of a time when I didn't think of Jesus as a trusted friend and confidant. I have only come to realize how rare a gift this is as an adult. This is precisely why I am so grateful to my mother for this precious gift of faithfulness. She taught me to pray as soon as I was old enough to fold my hands, bow my head and speak the simple words of childhood prayers. She taught me to sing the songs of my faith in voice loud and strong. This is why I know so many of the hymns by heart. I've literally been singing them all my life. She also taught me even more by her example of how important it was to read and study the Bible and attend church every week and to support the church by being actively involved in everything from study groups to boards and committees. I need to be clear though that she didn't tell me how vital faith was to the living of life each day. She showed me. Even though I learned what it meant to live a faithful life from her at a young age, I did not fully appreciate how faith provided the bulwark that enabled my mother to live through some horrible experiences that circumstances caused her to face alone.

My mother was sexually assaulted as a child by an older cousin, a trauma she only faced in her 70's when she finally had the courage to tell her sister who, it turned out, had also been assaulted by the same cousin. She lost her first baby to stillbirth and had to remain in the hospital for days by herself as the doctors felt she needed to deliver the baby naturally if she ever wanted to have more children. My dad couldn't be with her because he was working overtime in the steel mills to provide for his new family. Her parents didn't like hospitals. So, she stayed in the hospital for days suffering the agony of the loss of this baby alone except for the nurses who cared for her. Then, she lost her father unexpectedly shortly before I was born when he died of an acute penicillin reaction as he was in one of the first groups of patients to receive the miracle drug. And she endured so

much more than these two tragedies. I share these two stories because to me they illustrates how powerfully faith can act as antidote to the incredible hardships life throws at you. I have no doubt my mother's relationship with God was why she was able to survive all that she did. It's also why she was determined to share that faith with me in every way she knew how from my earliest days. But that gift of faith to me was also so much more for her because I was her tangible reminder that God never abandons us, that God has a way of working good from every tragedy if only one has the faith to endure. I was her gift from God and her gift of faith to me was also witness of her faithfulness to God despite all the reasons she had for turning her back on God.

Faithfulness is, I think, something all of us who try to live as Christians struggle with at times. Sometimes those struggles are quite obvious – those dark nights of the soul we have all experienced at one time or another. These are the moments when, in the dark of night, we have struggled with our worst fears and worries and questions to the point of despair. Our faith is nowhere in sight as we turn over in our minds questions like: Why is life so unfair? Why did this person have to die? Why did I lose my job? Why did this person I love turn away from me? How will I take care of my family if I can't find a job? When will I ever feel healthy again? Where are you God?? WHERE ARE YOU, GOD??? Sound familiar? Of course, it does. We've all been there at one time or another. Even Jesus had those moments which we will hear about on Maundy Thursday during our Tenebrae Service as we remember his agonized prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. But how do we move beyond those moments of despair and loss of faith? How do we find God again? That is the question, isn't it?

Or is it? Our text this morning from Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth seems to suggest we may be asking the wrong question when we ask how we find God again when we feel God has forgotten all about us. What is the right question, the question Paul would have us ask? Let's consider this entire text a little more deeply to see if we can discern the answer. First of all, it's important to understand the context in which Paul was writing this letter. And that's what this is – an actual letter Paul was writing to the leaders of the church in Corinth, a church he started – when word reached him, presumably in a letter sent to him, that there were

problems brewing in the church. Corinth was a vibrant city in its day, a leading center for trade in the Roman empire and one with a unique history. When the Romans first conquered the city, they utterly destroyed it, leveling it down to nothing. After a few years, they repopulated the city with, of all things, former slaves now free and eager to work hard to build lives of their own. This meant that Corinth was a city populated by all different kinds of people with different religions and ethnicities, different cultures and even different languages. It was a well-educated population where speech and knowledge, which Paul specifically references in the text we read this morning, was especially valued. This is exactly why he included it in his remarks to the church leadership. He knew these were thinking people who valued the power of words.

The language of this passage, when we look at it cold, seems to be heaping the highest praise on the people of the Corinthian church – that the grace of God given to them through Jesus Christ has enriched them in every way. He tells them that “the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you ... so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Look at all God has done for you, he is telling them! You have everything you need to be a faithful people, a loving church community. But, this is not a compliment as we might be tempted to think. Instead, it’s actually Paul issuing them a reproof for the lack of cohesion Paul knows the church is experiencing: Look at all God has done for you, he says. You know what God has done for you. You have all that you need to be faithful to God and in your relationships with each other. Still, not sounding that much like a reproof until you read the next phrase: “God is faithful; by him you were called in to the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” That is basically a verbal slap in the face from Paul to the church leadership. Look at all God has done for you, all that God has given you to strengthen your faith and to live out God’s call into this fellowship. And you are blowing it. This we find out in the next verse when Paul says, “I appeal to you brothers and sisters ... that all of you be in agreement and that there be no division among you.” Okay, then. There IS a problem here and Paul has just named it – division. They are fighting amongst themselves about what we don’t know and it’s clear the reason they are fighting doesn’t matter to Paul. The problem is the fighting and

the division it brings to light. Paul leaves no doubt that this act of fighting, of focusing on and even fomenting divisions between factions is the exact opposite of what it means to be faithful. God has been faithful to you by giving you everything you need to live out your call from God, Paul tells them. But you are not doing that. And that, Paul is telling them, means you are not acting faithfully to God.

This, dear ones, brings us to that question I suggested is the question Paul would have us ask when we are considering how we approach those moments of feeling as though we have lost God, lost faith, lost that sacred connection we need. In those moments, Paul would not have us ask “where is God?” or “why has God abandoned me?” This question makes no sense, Paul would say, because we would be posing it to God, hoping for a divine answer to just drop down to us out of the sky. No, Paul would say the question to ask in those moments of deep despair is instead, “But what has God done for you?” God is faithful to you, Paul says in no uncertain terms. But have you been faithful to God? Has God gifted you with people to share their faith with you, to pray with you and for you, to sing with you when its time to sing and to cry with you when tears are the only thing that makes sense? Of course, God has. But do you see them, do you recognize them as the gifts of God that they are or do you just shrug them off as something that just happens, something you are entitled to? Dear ones, this is the question Paul invites us to ask ourselves in those moments when our faith seems gone, when God’s voice is silent in our ears, when our hearts feel achingly empty. How have *you* been faithful to God? That IS the question worthy of your ponderings and your prayers.

These experiences of the dark night of the soul, those moments when God’s voice goes silent, is, as it turns out, a common experience to all of us seeking to live a life of faith. Benedictine tradition even has a name for it --- *acedia*. This word can be defined in various ways but I am partial to Kathleen Norris’ comparison of it to being stuck in a spiritual desert. You just feel dry and brittle inside, not unlike those dry bones the prophet Ezekiel describes from one of his more memorable visions. In this vision, God brings Ezekiel to a valley filled with dry bones, the skeletons of the defeated armies of the Kingdoms of Judah and Israel. God asks Ezekiel, “mortal, can these bones live?” Ezekiel answered God, “O Lord, you know.”

An ingenious answer by the way. That's when God told Ezekiel to prophesy to the dry bones, telling them that God will "breathe on them and they shall live." Prophecy to those dry bones, Ezekiel, telling them, "O hear the word of the Lord!" Ezekiel does, and they do. Such a vivid image this creates of dry and dead bones, dry and dead people, coming back to life just from hearing the word of the Lord! Imagine that.

Kathleen Norris also suggests a remedy for *acedia*, those dark and dry moments when God feels absent. Norris recommends that you just keep on keeping on with the life of faith. Keep reading the Bible. Keep going to church. Keep praying. Keep on doing what brought you to God in the first place and then just trust that God will do the rest. She also suggests you cultivate the practice of resting in God's presence. Just resting, sitting in the quiet wherever you happen to find yourself. Not praying. Not trying to recall a Bible verse or a song or anything at all. Just resting and trusting somehow, some way that God is there. Bit by bit, little by little, the dryness in our bones will give way to new life as God's breath finds its way into your soul. And it does! It truly does! Given the time and space needed in your heart, God will breathe life back into your bones and hope back into your soul. This I know beyond doubt as did my mother, as did our friend Paul.

So, dear ones, as you forge into the week ahead and all the challenges it is sure to hold, dare to find those moments when you can rest in God's presence, when you can remind yourself of God's never-ending faithfulness to you. Dare to believe that God does love you, especially in those moments when it feels like God has forgotten your name. Nothing could be further from the truth because to God you are truly precious and simply unforgettable, always and forever. Dear ones, hold on to this truth like the lifeline it is and you will always find your way to reclaim that faithfulness you seek. And in doing this, may you discover the incredible joy of being as faithful to God as God has been to you. Amen.