

The Fruit of the Spirit is... Faithfulness

Genesis 12:1-4 Hebrews 11:8-12

Quick reminder of the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. That's a lot to take in a few weeks!

And it reminds me of something I heard at a conference I attended many years ago. The keynote speaker saw all of us earnest note-takers, with pen and paper in hand (or ipad), eager to take in everything she was about to say. But she told us to do something that has changed how I take things in and learn. She said, "I want you to put down your pens and paper and devices, and just listen. If or when there comes a point where something that is said grabs your attention, pinches a bit, or generally nudges you, THEN write it down. Don't try too hard to take *everything* in, and perfect your life. Just let God show you, through your reactions, what you need to know." This is so wise. It both relieves us of the expectation that we're to take everything in, and, it helps us to focus, and listen with attentiveness, waiting to be moved in some way.

I love this approach, not just to sermons but to *any* learning, including our daily activities. To simply be present, show up fully and be attentive and listen, for those nudges or pinches, or flashes of insight. God speaks to us through our

minds, of course, but also through our intuition, our instincts and reactions. And our conscience. Because God dwells in there, by the Holy Spirit.

So, with all of our experiences in life (this morning, in worship) I hope we can each simply listen for that nudge, or insight, or challenge, or encouragement. And take away what we need to take away.

This morning we're looking at faithfulness. The word 'faith' and the word 'faithfulness' are the same word in Greek, so it is used both as a noun and as an adjective, depending on the context. This happens a lot in English too. Like the word "fair." "Fair" is an event with barnyard animals and baking contests and arcade games. Or, "fair" can mean equitable and in accordance with rules and standards. Or, "fair" can mean light or beautiful (like, fair skies). The word "faith" in Greek is like that. It's something we can have. It's something we can use and exercise. And, it's a descriptor of persons who exhibit it through their living.

When it comes to faith and faithfulness, the example most often held up in Scripture as the example for faith (faithfulness) is Abraham. (Note: in the Genesis reading, his name had not been changed yet, from Abram to Abraham. I'll be referring to him as Abraham because that's how we know him). We heard the first example of Abraham's faith in the reading from Genesis. Now we will hear a New Testament author describe that faith, or faithfulness, to us.

Hebrews 11:8-12

8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because she (not “he” as it says in your chair Bible; in Greek it’s the feminine pronoun) considered him faithful who had promised. ¹²Therefore from one person (Sarah), and this one as good as dead (both of them, actually), descendants were born, ‘as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.’

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Let’s look at the two ways that Scripture approaches faith, faithfulness, and what faithfulness means. First, faith is...

1. A conviction that leads to action. Belief that leads to behaviors. So, as

Hebrews 11:1 puts it: faith is the *assurance* of things hoped for, the *conviction* of things unseen. And then when you read the rest of chapter 11 you have this roll call of women and men who lived by faith; their belief (their conviction and assurance) led to behaviors that reflected their faith.

In this sense, faithful means *full of faith*. A strong conviction that God is trustworthy; a belief that God keeps promises; that God will never lead us astray. That *God* is faithful, and worthy of our trust.

This is why Abraham, for example, is held up as one of the main Biblical examples of faith and faithfulness—because he trusted God when God made ridiculous promises to him and Sarah, and called them to head out on a journey without a map or ultimate destination.

So perhaps one good definition of faith, or faithfulness, is: to put our trust in God's trustworthiness. Which leads to following and obeying God in the face of uncertainty, or even adversity.

On God's side, it means that God can be trusted. When Jesus says, for example, "I will never leave you nor forsake you," that word can be trusted.

On our side, it means we can put our full weight down on God's trustworthiness, and follow, even in the face of uncertainty or adversity.

I love the line in Hebrews 11:8: "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, *not knowing where he was going.*" We typically use that phrase, "Not knowing where he was going" to describe someone who is either lost, or too stubborn to ask for directions. The bible uses it, in this instance, as a statement of faith and trust. You can imagine the conversation... God: "Hey Abraham—go!" Abraham: "Okay, where?" God: "You'll know when you get there." Abraham:

“Alright; um, can I have a little more information? Some directions would be nice.” God: “Sure, but only one day at a time; I’ll guide you as you go.”

This type of faith, which is the faith that we are invited to have, and exercise, requires a certain amount of risk. That’s part of beliefs leading to behaviors. It involves a certain amount of risk. Maybe not packing up everything and moving out on a journey at age 75, but risk of some kind. Because faith isn’t just intellectual assent to beliefs, or to a set of propositions, but trust *in a being*—the triune God—who calls us out of our routines and comforts and invites us into the adventure of being part of his plan to bless the world, like Abraham.

Like Abraham and Sarah, we are blessed to be a blessing; and that involves faith and trust, and it can include taking risks, as God calls us to take them.

Again, faith is not just intellectual assent to doctrine, but trust in a person, and acting on that trust. Jesus called disciples to *follow* him; he didn’t call them to sit in a classroom and listen to lectures for three years until they got all of the information down, just right—with ipads and a lot of note-taking. They were invited to trust a person, to have aha moments and be open to having their vision expanded and their minds blown occasionally, and then follow him—not knowing where they would be going—iterating, with Jesus, around the region, and sometimes going into uncomfortable territory.

And so, in spite of the disciples' foibles and follies and their inability to understand sometimes, they actually showed remarkable courage and trust to follow this guy who claimed to be the Son of God. That's pretty amazing.

Faith is to put our trust in God's trustworthiness, and follow God in the face of uncertainty, or even adversity. Proverbs 3:5 says it succinctly and beautifully: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding." Because, the Lord is trustworthy and knows what he's doing. And, because God is good, and faithful. And, because our understanding is always going to be limited. We have to leave room for mystery, and for faith.

So in that sense, faith is not certainty (otherwise it wouldn't be called faith!), and it is not simply assent to a set of beliefs and doctrine. Beliefs and doctrine are important, don't get me wrong; but if we only acquire head knowledge, we will become top-heavy, and we will forever be dissecting everything as being either true or false, agree or disagree, which actually keeps real faith at a safe distance because it doesn't require anything of us except to say some words, or to agree or disagree.

Faith, at some point, must necessarily lead to practice and journey, to trust and risk—which helps us become more comfortable with uncertainty, and with discomfort.

So, first: faith is assurance & conviction which leads to trust and action in the face of uncertainty and adversity, because we believe that God is trustworthy.

Second...

2. Faith is also defined as *trustworthiness*. Someone who is reliable.

Someone who can be counted on. Like Horton the elephant. Remember Horton (from that great Dr. Seuss story), who committed to sit on a bird's egg and keep it warm until it hatched, while the mother bird flew south to Florida to sit on a beach? Horton endured rain and the cold of winter, the ridicule of passers-by, the boredom of sitting in place, to remain faithful to his commitment. Remember his quotable refrain (if you know it, say it with me): *I meant what I said, and I said what I meant, an elephant is faithful 100 percent*. So, Horton becomes a good example, if a silly one, of someone you can count on, who is trustworthy, rain or shine, to do what he said he would do. Thank you, Dr. Seuss!

So (back to Abraham), if Abraham trusted God because he believed that God was trustworthy, God trusted *Abraham* because he knew that *Abraham* was trustworthy and faithful.

God could trust Abraham and Sarah because he knew Abraham and Sarah were just crazy enough to believe God wanted to bless the world through them,

and that God would lead them to a new place that they would call home, and not leave them to just wander aimlessly without direction. So, trust and faith goes both directions.

Same with Mary, the mother of our Lord. She trusted God, but God knew that *she* could be trusted, and faithful to what God was calling her to do. Talk about risk! And trust: “Let it be to me according to your word” is her great response to the call.

Jesus’ parable of the talents is another great example of this. The master, Jesus says, *entrusted* them with some of his assets. And after they put those assets to work and did something with what was entrusted to them, the great commendation they get from their master is: “Well done, good and *faithful* servant...” NRSV: “trustworthy.” And in the context of this parable, faithfulness involved action, and some risk-taking. Like Abraham, like Mary.

Now, I’m guessing there aren’t any of us who believe we have a calling on the same scale as Abraham, or Mary. Yet they are provided as our examples, because they provide a model of what it looks like to both trust and to be trust-*worthy*. They had faith, *and* faithfulness.

And I want to be quick to point out these are not haloed, perfect saints we’re talking about here, *especially* Abraham. Faithfulness does not mean perfection,

nor does it require perfection. Abraham had a couple of monumental mess-ups. As did Moses with his anger issues, David with his pride issues, Peter with his impulsive foot-in-mouth issues.

But Abraham was considered faithful, and held up as an example of faithfulness, because he made course corrections after he made mistakes. He continued to trust God. He didn't quit, or fall into a pile of guilt or despair. Rather, he learned and moved on. He put it behind him. And that seems to be the pattern with God's saints in Scripture and throughout history. There is no despairing or throwing in the towel after a failure, but learning and moving forward. That's why I love to say that failure is never fatal, it's directional. Failure is never fatal, it's directional.

Maybe look at the word fail as an acronym: FAIL: First Attempt In Learning. Like a child learning to walk. There are lots of first attempts at learning to walk.

The issue is never whether or not we'll make mistakes and have failures. Of course we will. We just try not to make the same mistake over and over. If we do, it means we aren't learning.

So, faithfulness has a stick-to-it-iveness element, where we keep on keepin' on, even when we stumble.

And, faithfulness applies to the little things, and not just the big things. God won't necessarily call us to something big and brand new, but will simply and quietly call us follow through on a new commitment day by day, or maybe call us out of one routine into new routine, or to an occasional adventure, on a smaller scale. Jesus said, "whoever is faithful in a very little, is also faithful in much" (Lk. 16:10). Missionary Hudson Taylor said: "a little thing is a little thing, but *faithfulness* in a little thing is a big thing."

In that regard, faithfulness has a simplicity to it; and integrity with even the little things. When we decide I'm not going to fudge on the smaller ordinary everyday things while perhaps waiting for bigger and more important things to come along. And when you read their stories in the Bible, God saw in people like Hannah, and Esther, and Mary, and Moses, and Peter, and Abraham that they were faithful in the everyday things; so, God could call them to the bigger and extra-ordinary things.

In these days of cultural upheaval and change and transition, what does faithfulness look like for you, and for me? What does it look like to trust God, and be trustworthy at this time? I'm simply going to leave you with those questions

this morning, to reflect on in the days ahead, but I will remind us, briefly, of one important expression of faithfulness that we can *all* apply right now:

That is, we can exercise our faithfulness in prayer. Prayer is consistently a place where we can exercise faithfulness. Of not giving up on prayer and waiting on God. Jesus told a parable about a woman who pestered a judge until she got justice, and gospel writer Luke introduced that parable with these words: “Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray, and not lose heart.” To persevere. The apostle Paul, in Romans 12:12, say: “Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.” There, in that one verse you have three of the fruit of the spirit: joy, patience, and faithfulness.

Faithful... to pray—to keep ourselves, and each other, encouraged; to seek God’s strength, and wisdom, and guidance. Because God is faithful. 100%!

Your Faithfulness, O Lord, is Sure (based on Psalm 145)