



## THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT: FAITHFULNESS

Daniel 3:19-30; 1 Corinthians 4:1-2, 9-17

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*The New York Times* columnist, David Brooks, makes a distinction in his book, *The Road to Character*, between what he calls résumé virtues and eulogy virtues:

“The résumé virtues are the ones you list on your résumé, the skills that you bring to the job market and that contribute to external success. The eulogy virtues are deeper. They’re the virtues that get talked about at your funeral, the ones that exist at the core of your being – whether you are kind, brave, honest or faithful; what kind of relationships you formed” (p. xi).

It is these eulogy – or character – virtues of others that profoundly shape and influence our lives. It is the fruit of the Spirit manifest in the lives of others that we remember: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. When we are talking around the kitchen table late at night or worshipping at a memorial service in the church, we remember people whose lives have been significant to us. These virtues are the things we are most likely to remember and tell.

Today I want us to focus on faithfulness.

The book of Daniel tells the story of three young Jewish men – Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego – who have risen to become officials of the court of the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar. The king erects a giant golden statue and requires everyone in the kingdom to bow down and worship the statue or be thrown into a fiery furnace. The three young men will not abandon their God; they refuse to obey the command of the king. When it is reported to the king, he is furious and demands that the three be thrown into the fire. The king asks, “Who is the god that will deliver you out of my hands?” Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego respond, “If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up” (Daniel 3:15-18).

When the king looks in the fire, he sees not three – but four – unharmed figures. By the hand of an angel, God delivers the three men from the flames. The king sees the greatness of the God of Israel and commands that God be respected by all.

The story turns on two questions. First, will these young men keep the faith in the face of grave danger and almost certain death? We may not be facing death for being true to our faith, but we find our faithfulness can easily be beaten down by a thousand small blows. Paul says that we are to think of ourselves “as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they should be found trustworthy” (1 Corinthians 4:1-2). In other words, we are managers not only of our material resources, our time, and our talents, but we are stewards of the truth of the gospel. How we live, the values we treasure, the words we speak, the way we use our time, and the deeds we do are all a measure of our faithfulness as stewards

of the gospel: going along with bullying or demeaning others on social media; wasting our money on endless wants rather than spending it on what is needed to sustain our lives and the lives of others; not knowing what to say when asked to give an account of the faith within us; and cutting corners in business or in a profession when we think no one will notice or catch us. Grasping instead of giving, bearing grudges instead of forgiving, squandering our time instead of serving, and insisting on our way instead of lifting up others can all undermine the desire to live faithfully as a follower of Jesus.

When we feel particularly discouraged about our own thoughts, attitudes, and actions, we call to mind the people in our lives who have taught us by the witness of their lives what it means to be faithful.

As a pastor, I think about the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, the first pastor of the congregation I served in Indianapolis. He was the brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe who wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. He was what was known then as a New School Presbyterian. In the decades prior to the Civil War, as a New School pastor, he was expected to preach at least one abolitionist sermon a year. He was cautious and anxious about how such a sermon would be received in his Indiana congregation. God gave him the courage to be faithful to the gospel truth and he did preach against slavery. As you may know, Beecher went on to become, through his preaching and writings, one of the most ardent Christian abolitionists of the era. By the grace of God, he was faithful to the gospel truth. Where are we being challenged to be faithful in our work, schools, homes, church, and community? God will give us the courage to be faithful to the gospel of Jesus. A faithful person stays awake at night beside the bed of a critically ill child; a faithful person encourages a friend going through a time of trial; a faithful person speaks out against injustice in our community; and a faithful person stands with a spouse who is facing serious trouble in business.

Our congregation is facing times of challenge and change. Even as our church is seeking a Senior Pastor, we have just said goodbye to our Youth Pastor and our Director of Children's Ministries. What do we as faithful Christians do? As soon as they knew the challenges before us, our Personnel Committee sprang into action to form committees to call talented interim staff to support our amazing and faithful volunteers. Others are working faithfully and hard to build relationships, to provide fellowship opportunities, to listen to concerns, and to encourage a spirit of positivity among us. In all these ways, we have around us friends – as Paul says – who are seeking to be “servants of Christ and faithful stewards of the mysteries of God.” You and I can make a difference in how we choose to respond to the challenges before us.

The second question the story of the fiery furnace raises is this: is God able to deliver them? If so, is God able to deliver us? Throughout the centuries we have seen how Christians have lived and died for the faith. Countless believers have given their lives for the truth of Jesus and to protect the lives of others. In the early centuries of the church, there were many Christian martyrs who refused to deny their faith in order to save their skin. In the Reformation, in World Wars, in oppressive dictatorships, in the struggle for Civil Rights, and in the current oppression of Christians and people of other faiths in areas around the world, the faithful have stood firm and

often paid the ultimate price for faithfulness. We are blessed to live in a country that protects, by law, the free exercise of religion. Yet, we too know there is a cost for being faithful in an increasingly secular world. In the face of the tragedies of human history, how can we say that God is faithful, and that God will deliver us?

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul warns the church how costly faithfulness can be. “To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands” (1 Corinthians 4:11-12). Yet, Paul does not let the adversities they face determine how they will live. In the face of adversity, they continue to be faithful by demonstrating in their actions the love of Jesus. “When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly” (1 Corinthians 4:13). Paul says, so what if the world treats us like fools or garbage; we have only one Lord to please.

How does Paul know that God will deliver the church no matter what happens? He knows it because God delivered Jesus from the fires of betrayal, persecution, arrest, beatings, crucifixion, and even death. God delivered him through death and will deliver us through death so that death no longer has power over us. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out of the fiery furnace, but Jesus came out of the tomb.

One last thing: Paul dares to say to the Corinthians, if you have any doubt about being faithful, look at me. I am like your father in the faith. When we doubt our capacity to be faithful, we look not only at Paul, but at the lives of those who have given birth to and nurtured the faith in us. We see the fruit of the Spirit in them; we learn from the virtues of their character how to live a faithful life.

Since I arrived as your interim pastor six months ago, I have had the privilege of getting to know some of the saints of this congregation who lived and died in faith. I saw in their lives the Christian virtues that enabled them to be faithful servants of Christ until the end. Their legacy of faith inspires us like modern day Daniels and Pauls. If we paused for a moment, you could name them in your heart. Not only them, but those who are perhaps known only to you; those whose faithfulness has inspired your own life and calls you this day to be found a faithful “servant of Christ and steward of the mysteries of God”.

One day, when others gather around the kitchen table, meet in worship, see each other at the coffee shop, what will people say about us? Will they say that we were faithful, in our own time and place, to our calling to our calling to follow Jesus? Are we faithful now?