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July 28, 2019

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Matthew 25:14-30

FAITH AND FAITHFULNESS

Here are some ‘what’ questions. What do you believe about God, about Jesus, about the Holy Spirit? What do you believe about humanity and how God is revealed? What do you believe about divine forgiveness and God’s will for all that is? There are a lot of ‘what’ questions that can be asked in exploring our particular beliefs, the faith components that make up our belief system. But there are also the ‘so what’ questions that can be asked. These are questions that push us to look at how our faith is relevant to how we live our lives.

We are in the midst of a series of sermons that is called, “Faith and blank.” Today we seek to explore the relationship between believing and living out our beliefs, how faith relates to faithfulness. We start off doing so by looking at one of Jesus’ teaching stories, what is sometimes called “the parable of the talents.” And I’ll say quickly that this is not a story about talent, as in exceptional ability. It is a story where the word ‘talent’ is used to describe an ancient unit of measurement for a lot of money. Each talent was the amount of money a worker could earn over twenty years of labor, quite a considerable sum. A wealthy man, upon leaving on an extended journey, entrusts portions of his financial portfolio to three of his servants. One oversees riches worth a hundred years of wages, another has responsibility for wealth equal to forty years of wages, and a third is entrusted with an amount of money that could be earned in twenty years. When the man returns, he calls in his servants to go over their investment results. Those who had been stewards of the larger amounts had invested them aggressively and wisely, doubling their value. When the boss found out what they had done, he commended them for their faithfulness and gave them even greater responsibilities. But the third servant had been frightened to take any risk with that which was placed in his care because he believed he was working for a harsh employer. So rather than use an imaginative, even slightly risky strategy, the third servant had opted to simply bury the riches in the ground, where it was safe, but did not grow in value. The story ends with the

boss expressing significant displeasure at what this third servant had done as a steward of his riches.

This parable is not about money and financial investment strategy any more than it is about talent. Neither is it about a generous boss who abruptly becomes punitive. Rather, it is about how people's beliefs shape their actions in positive and negative ways. When we are blessed to be able to trust in the goodness and generosity of God, then we are more likely to boldly invest or confidently live out that faith which has been placed in our care. But for those of us who for some reason have an understanding that God is cruel and frightening, then we would have little basis to venture out or dream about what could be done with the assets entrusted to us. With such an understanding of the parable, we can begin to see how a certain type of faith in who God is, can lead us toward faithfulness.

We can also see how when people of faith recognize the rich blessings of God that have come into their lives, that it can lead to possibilities that we might begin to reflect the love and kindness of God in our relations with others. And yet, even with a good and kind God, there are some experiences that do not seem to be blessings by any stretch of the imagination.

Many of us have been blessed by the faith writings of Frederick Buechner. He tells of speaking at a conference once where he dared to share a painful part of his life's story. When he was a child, his father had been out drinking and came home. His mother was afraid her husband might want to go back out, so she got his car keys and wanted to hide them. Frederick was in bed, but was not yet asleep. His mother gave the keys to him and told him to hold onto them. His father came into his bedroom demanding the keys and young Frederick didn't know what to do other than just pull the sheets over his head and hope his father left him alone.

After he had told that story, Buechner was surprised when one of the organizers of the conference came up to him and said, "You have had a fair amount of pain in your life ... and you have been a good steward of it." That got the author and speaker thinking about ways different people choose to respond to difficult circumstances. Many choose to hide or bury their pain. Or some try to use it to win sympathy or as an excuse for failure. Some allow themselves to be embittered by their painful experiences.

But then, there are some who, by God's grace, are able to use their own painful experiences to help them to grow in compassion for others who are suffering, to come to an understanding that it was God's power and accompaniment, God's faithfulness, that enabled them to get through those difficult times, even growing into the person they had it in them to become. ¹

Such painful personal experiences may challenge our belief system. But just having a set of faith statements that we affirm as being true is not enough to live out a life of faith. Faith apart from some level of faithfulness is empty dogma. If we believe all the right things but don't live as if we believe anything, then what good is that? Some would say that the right beliefs get us a ticket to heaven. But the right beliefs also shape us into increasingly faithful servants of a faithful God. Faith itself is more than a set of beliefs – it is the power of those beliefs, the power of the God in whom we believe to shape us. Some of you tell me that you wish your faith was stronger. I want my faith to continue to grow as well. But how does that happen?

In part, it happens as we don't just focus on basking in God's love, but in seeking to reflect that love. It happens as we don't just live in hope for a life beyond this life for us, but as we step out in hope to join God's redemptive work in the world even now, proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed. It involves using what has been placed in our care - our God-given energy, our abilities, our various resources, our time, our positive and even our less-than-positive experiences – investing ourselves as full partners in God's faithful engagement with the world.

What does that look like? It looks like our deacons and ruling elders and our Sunday school teachers and youth advisors and various volunteers who show up through thick and thin to carry out the ministry of this congregation. It looks like the dedicated action of someone toward a family member, caring for them through times of joy and challenge. It looks like those who faithfully, consistently share with or work with those who are hungry or those who are grieving or those who are at wit's end. It looks like those who accompany and love people through the difficult times. It looks like those who give sacrificially so our church buildings can be accessible for all. It looks like those who diligently work for society to be

structured in ways that are inclusive, civil, and fair. It looks just a little bit like the faithfulness that God shows each one of us.

For even if our faith is not all that strong, our God is plenty strong, and can inspire and lead us toward a life of faithfulness and greater faith. What we believe can direct us toward faithfulness, but ultimately it is the One in whom we believe that does. Our lives may indicate that we are not fully invested in what God is doing in our world. But there is One who is fully invested in you and me. There is One who never ever gives up on us - thanks be unto our faithful God who can lead us toward greater faith and faithfulness.

¹ <http://www.csec.org/index.php/archives/23-member-archives/229-frederick-buechner-program-3416>

