

Fruit of the Spirit – Faithfulness

It is relatively easy for Christians to say they believe in Jesus. Or to talk sort of generically about faith. The fruit of the Spirit this week is faithfulness which is different from faith. But I want to say a couple words about faith first.

In too much of the Christian world, faith has become a checklist of doctrines to believe. That kind of Christianity is rapidly losing its luster, but in many ways we're struggling to figure out what it should be.

Faith is belief, or trust in God as creator and redeemer. We come to believe that Jesus went to death and back for our sake. Faith begins with Christ's faithfulness to God, and to the mission for which he was sent – the mission to save the world. Christ was...and still is faithful to us.

Jesus never really taught faithfulness with words – if you put faithfulness in a search bar on Bible Gateway, you won't find the word hardly at all in the gospels. But Jesus demonstrated it – his prayer at Gethsemane showed a very human Jesus, praying for another way. But he remained faithful, even when he knew the mission would be deadly.

Faithfulness is how we live out of that trust. The faithfulness of God in Christ gives us courage to live faithfully. If we truly believe in Jesus – if we truly trust him - we want to follow his teachings. We want to follow him.

Real faith shapes how we live – it shapes how we spend our time and our money. It shapes how we treat those we love and those we detest.

What we put our faith and trust in will shape how we live our lives. Faithfulness to Christ comes out in faithfulness to others...our partners/spouses, our family, friends, neighbors, and all of creation.

We also need to talk about what blocks us from living faithful lives. And, no surprise, it's the same thing that plagued the ancients whose stories make up the Old Testament. It's idolatry.

For the ancients, it was faith in physical statues and figures that represented gods for whom love was not a primary motive. Understanding ancient gods is beyond the scope of this sermon, but whatever god the people of Israel idolized, it led them to violence, exploitation, and oppression, especially of the poor, the widow and orphan, and the sojourners – or migrants – among them.

Present day idols are no different, although they have different names. Wealth and money, prestige, power, beauty, and so on.

I've had a couple conversations lately that reminded me, if you ask many pastors, they might say sports is an idol and it's the one that's hurting the church the most. I share the quandary of how youth sports have impacted the church. Sport isn't always an idol, but it can be. Any good thing can be turned into an idol, and sport can be used as an example.

Sports can bring joy. Sports allow people whose God-given gifts are athletic to express those gifts. I love sports. You likely know I love the Chicago Cubs. I can tell you a lot about the team over the last 10 years, and name quite a few of the greats from further back. I know who they've traded in recent years and who remains of the world series team. I can name most of the players now.

We spend time and money for the games. But I don't get so focused on the Cubs that I compromise my work, or time for worship and prayer and time for other pursuits. I work to keep it in balance with things that I know are more important. And when their season falls apart, as it appears may be the case this year, I shrug and start looking forward to Husker football and repeat the well-known Cubs mantra – there's always next year.

But if someone whose team loses gets in a fight at the stadium or at the bar after the game, or they go home and take it out on a spouse or the dog, that team has become their idol. Or if an athlete or athlete's parents manipulate or curse coaches, referees, or other players, their child's sport is an idol.

When an entire family's world revolves around kids' sports, the possibility that it has become an idol is very real, but I'm not convinced that that family has made it an idol. As a culture, we have created a system that idolizes sports and makes parents and athletes feel like they have no choice.

The real idol is whatever lies underneath our cultural obsession. The real idol is whatever we are searching for that is not of God.

The same can be said of the pursuit of wealth. Making money is not inherently bad. But we have created a system based on fear of not having enough. That system works against generosity and economic equity and justice.

Regardless of what the visible idol is, the foundation is the belief in the zero-sum game. That's the game that says if someone wins, someone else has to lose.

So we frantically work to not be on the losing end. We endlessly measure ourselves against some standard – whether it's wealth or success or looks or athletic ability or whatever.

The idol underneath all those things – the dragon if you will – is an image of God that says some people are favored and some are not. And with that as your idol, you spend your whole life trying to make sure you're favored...and worried that you're not.

Letting go of that idol means truly believing that in Christ, we are all chosen and loved and there are not winners and losers. It's the freedom that can come from that...from losing that fear...that enables us to live faithfully.

Living faithfully requires some courage. Living a life faithful to God can run counter to other loyalties we might have. Faithful living means working to make sure all know they are valued and ensuring that all have what they need to thrive.

Faithfulness is commitment to being a disciple of Jesus when the rest of the world would have us follow something or someone else. This is why although our political lives can be a tool in our work to live faithfully, political leaders can never be where we actually put our faith.

In the quest to live faithfully, some people seem to be able to start with faith. Their faith is strong and they can't help but live faithfully. They serve God's people, they tell others about Jesus, they give generously. They are people who truly trust – and follow – the Spirit's guidance.

Others seem to have to start with that first timid step and then faith is built with each step. That's how it was for me. When I made the career change from medicine to seminary, I did not have a lot of faith at the beginning that it was a good idea. And I could not see a clear path. But I could see the next step. So I would take that step...and it felt right. And my faith that the Holy Spirit was leading me grew each time that happened.

Living faithfully is kind of a circle – sometimes we are filled with doubt, but we step out into something new and scary anyway. In looking back, we can see that faith empowered us to do that. Then, as we step out, faith grows. Then as faith grows, we are more able to live faithfully.

And of course, all along the way, staying connected to the Spirit is essential – prayer, worship, scripture reading, meditation. Our connection to the source and object of faith is what enables us to live faithfully.

Living faithfully doesn't have to be dramatic. Living faithfully happens when we're kind to the harried cashier at the grocery store or we let someone into traffic. It happens when we lay aside our egos. It happens when we advocate for the poor by writing letters to elected representatives. It happens when we forgive or give or volunteer or donate to a food bank or

pantry. It happens when we do our best at our work and treat others with dignity and respect, no matter who or what they are.

What are some ways you live faithfully?

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More than ever, the world needs Christians who live truly faithfully to the teachings of Jesus. I'm grateful for this community as we learn and grow together in faithfulness.