

Tending Fidelity
Second Sunday of Lent
March 4, 2015
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Texts: Genesis 17.1-7, 15-16; 18.11-15;
 Psalm 22.23-31;
 Romans 4.13-25;
 Mark 8.31-39

Of all the qualities of God revealed to us in scripture, God's fidelity, or faithfulness, to us as human beings has to be one of the most remarkable. By remarkable – I mean unbelievable. It's hard to fathom a loyalty and commitment like we see from God. From the very first pages of scripture to the very last we read story after story of human beings responding to God's invitation to forge relationship and covenant then wavering in that commitment and wandering from that relationship. God's Spirit is prone toward fidelity, pursuing us when we wander, recommitting to us when we waver. This propensity to be faithful is staggering when you watch it unfold over time. Evolutionary biology doesn't seem to be in our favor when it comes to this particular virtue. Or maybe it's just deep in our broken human nature to be selfish and suspicious and cautious and self-protective. Whatever the reason, we seem to struggle when it comes to being faithful and loyal and dependable over time.

Look at God through these texts before us today. This whole story of Abraham and Sarah is absurd on so many levels. It makes perfect sense to me that Sarah would laugh when she overheard this unbelievable promise being repeated after decades of disappointment and waiting. And why should God remain faithful to that promise after all the crazy things that Abraham and Sarah do in the course of their waiting. Go back and read the Abraham and Sarah cycle again. It is full of drama and intrigue – all because they tired of waiting and fail to trust that God will do what God has promised. Seriously, God could have walked away from these two and none of us would judge. It's all so absurd. No wonder Sarah laughed when this stranger visiting Abraham puts forward the promise one last time and invites them to keep believing – to keep trusting.

In our reading, I skipped over the context for Sarah's laughter. Chapter 17 gives us the reaffirmation of this covenant from God. And then in chapter 18 some stranger visitors come to speak with Abraham and they tell him that this is the year when this promise will be fulfilled. Sarah overhears that conversation and laughs at the thought of it. I've come to see these strange visitors as providing some accompaniment for them as they wait; someone who can voice for them a trust in God's fidelity when they have simply lost all hope.

We do that for each other in the body of Christ. I'm sure you've had those experiences. This story brought back to my mind this week a strong memory of sitting on the back porch of my friend, Renee's house, after being heartbroken for what seemed the millionth time when I was somewhere in my mid-to-late twenties. My life was good and full in so many ways but I was longing for a partner and every time it seemed like it might happen something went wrong. After that particular heart break I was left rather hopeless and lonely. I remember so well Renee's pronouncement that God would be faithful to me. She didn't know how. She didn't know when or even if a lifelong partner was in my future. What she trusted was that God saw my loneliness and knew the deep desire of my heart and God would be faithful to me. And I remember her saying "I know, Jill, that you can't hold much hope right now but I am holding hope for you."

Renee preached at mine and Andrew's wedding quite a number of years later. We laughed looking back on how it all unfolded. So surprising and so delightful and so different from what I had expected. I imagine the day of Isaac's birth being something like that for Sarah and Abraham. I imagine them laughing together in the delight that comes when you discover that God is faithful beyond all expectation or hope.

But there is another side to fidelity that isn't quite so beautiful. Actually maybe it is beautiful; it's just not as easy or delightful because of what it costs. As we turn toward the gospel, we see what God's fidelity - the kind of faithfulness that is steadfast and unswerving - what it looks like in the flesh.

As watch Jesus making his way toward Jerusalem we see how the crowds are enamored by his healing and power. We watch as they are inspired at

first by his teaching. But over time as all that he teaches begins to sink in, some become perplexed and others become overtly angered. And in the end he is left to literally die alone. That's not the end of the story but that snap shot of what God's faithfulness looks like in the flesh is rather daunting.

There is not much in our evolutionary biology to make us prone toward fidelity of this kind. God's Spirit has her work cut out for her in tending this impulse inside of us. That's why Peter reprimands Jesus when he talks about what is ahead for him: "you shall never die!" That's what we're wired for: self-preservation and self-protection. We are wired to seek out pleasure and to avoid pain.

When I think about the Spirit tending fidelity in us several images come to mind. Several of you came to mind. We have members who have served on our congregational care ministry well over a decade... they have faithfully visited the members of their care group who cannot come out to worship. Others of you come to mind as well, you might not be on a formal ministry of care, but nonetheless you make your rounds every week or two to check in on a friend or a member of the church or a member of your family. You do this on the days when you look forward to it and you do this on the days when you have other things you could be doing. I am in awe of the dedication, the faithfulness, the generous love that is poured out in this way.

That was one positive image that came to mind. Another counter-image if you will also came to mind. I mentioned before that our wiring isn't in our favor. I realized that the popular culture isn't either. Last week I caught an episode of *Grey's Anatomy* and there was a scene in which a brilliant doctor who hadn't shown any interest whatsoever in the personal life of one of her fellows suddenly became intrigued and enthralled when she learned that her student has been unfaithful in her marriage. She made some comment about how she thought she was boring but this made her interesting. I shook my head and realized that this is the culture in which we live: a culture that is intrigued by infidelity and bored by a lifetime of faithfulness.

That is why I loved an article that was the cover story in *The Christian Century* back on January 21 an issue called *Promises We Keep*. The article was called "On Marriage and Other Covenants: A Long Obedience" by Katherine Willis Pershey. She begins with the words "It is strange to think of a particular person as the person with whom I did not have an affair." And she goes on to describe an attraction that took her by surprise to someone who was not her spouse and how she handled that very normal experience of having an inappropriate attraction. She talked about the internal dialogue she had, then the conversation she shared with her spouse, and finally the boundaries she put into place to be sure that she tended carefully the fidelity she had promised to her spouse. My favorite line of the article is the one they pulled out in bold: "Don't believe anyone who says otherwise: fidelity can be very sexy." I think the church needs to put that idea out into our culture!

But she goes on to talk about what it looks like to nurture a long obedience and ends with a beautiful story about a celebration her church held for their beloved associate minister on the 60th anniversary of his ordination. She wrote: "A long obedience in the same direction has its stretches marked by the strain of toil and the fret of care, but it also has its glorious mountaintop vistas and the camaraderie of good company. And sometimes - if you happen to land in a place that knows how to party - a three piece band playing Dixieland jazz sets up shop outside the sanctuary to fete you as you make your way to the fellowship hall to greet hundreds of people who love you because you have loved them so very well. If you ask me, nothing says "well done good and faithful servant" like a tuba, a clarinet, and banjo."

Friends, I have no delusions that we will ever match the kind of faithfulness God has shown to each of us - the kind of fidelity we see in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus - but I do know that the way to life and love and beauty and goodness is found in this direction.

May this season of Lent be a time where we are captivated, enthralled and intrigued by what a life of true and deep fidelity can bring.