

2018 09 30 – Faithfulness

James 5:13-20

It's been a long time since I've struggled this much to write a sermon. I've studied the scripture passage, I've read the commentaries, I've searched for stories, I've explored the meaning of the words and yet nothing is coming. I'm even asking myself, "Here I am...filled with worry and doubt ... who am to preach about faithfulness?" I've been sitting in front of a blank screen for 3 hours and the time I've set aside to write this week's reflection is disappearing.

So I've decided to begin anyways. I've decided that the only way to make this happen is to put down on paper what's going on in my head and in my heart. Despite not having any idea of where I'm going with this sermon, I've started to type. And even as I'm typing these words, I realize that this is faith.

Faith is typing even when we don't know what it is that we want to say. Faith is praying even when we don't know what to pray for. Faith is believing in something or someone even when what we believe seems improbable. Faith is trusting in something or someone even when we know how much it hurts when trust is betrayed. Faith is praying, believing and trusting that on Sunday morning there will be a sermon to preach even though it's Friday afternoon and the words are just not coming.

OK, I'm still typing... so let's begin with today's scripture passage. At the end of his letter, the author of the book of James writes, "Are any of you in trouble?"

Then pray. Are any of you in good spirits? Then sing a hymn of praise. Are any of you sick? Then call for the elders of the church, and have them pray over those who are sick and anoint them with oil in the name of Christ. And this prayer offered in faith will make them well.” “This prayer offered in faith will make them well.” The author is writing to a group of Jesus’ followers, and he is telling them that when they are in trouble or sick then they need to pray and that the prayers need to be made “in faith.”

I have to admit that part of my struggle in writing this sermon is the author’s suggestion that if we have faith our prayers will always be answered. He assures us that the sick will be made well and the sinner will be forgiven. He even goes on to suggest that, like the prophet Elijah, our prayers should be able to make the rain fall and the crops grow. I think I’ve told you before that I have never professed to be a rainmaker or a faith healer. Despite our best efforts, drought happens and people die. I would never suggest that if our prayers are not answered it’s because we didn’t pray hard enough or our faith wasn’t strong enough. Nobody needs to carry that kind of guilt

But I do believe that faith is important and that having faith, or being faithful is part of what it means to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus’ way. So let’s talk about the quality of being faithful; let’s talk about faithfulness. What does it mean to be faithful? It’s interesting to note that in the secular world, faithfulness is usually equated with loyalty, steadfastness or fidelity. We talk about being faithful to our employer, our sport team or our friends and we make vows of

fidelity when we get married. Faithfulness is an important part of any relationship.

But in the church faithfulness takes on a whole new dimension. Not only are we called to be faithful to the people and the organizations in our lives, but we are also called to be faithful to God, to the Holy Mystery, the Ground of our Being. So what does faithfulness to God entail? What are some of the ways that we demonstrate our faithfulness to God? *(wait for responses, pray, continue to struggle even when the going is tough, believe in the impossible, take leaps of faith, listen carefully to the voice within us, don't worship other idols (money, fame, success, etc), stay calm, have a positive outlook, do God's work in the world, care for others)* Or, if it's easier, what are some of the ways that we stray and are unfaithful? *(wait for responses, give up, stop praying, focus on other idols, worry, get stressed, be pessimistic)* Faithfulness is made up of all the elements of faith: belief, trust, fidelity and even our outlook on life, whether we have a positive or negative view of the world. When we are faithful to God then we are truly living as Jesus would want us to live, we are following Jesus way.

Of course faithfulness is not easy. There are many trials and temptations that can lead us astray. That's one of the reasons that we gather as a community of faith. There is one part of today's scripture reading that I totally agree with. The writer emphasizes the importance of sharing both our troubles and our joys in our congregations. When I returned to the church at the age of 29 it was the community that I found in Sunday worship, in committee work and in small groups that kept me coming back. In the church, we are called to listen to each

other, to pray together, to sing together and to study the word together. This is how we nurture our ability to be faithful to the sacred that exists within each one of us.

I don't believe that our prayers will always be answered, at least not in the way that we might expect, but I do believe in the faithfulness of God. I believe that our connection to the sacred is never severed. I believe that the Essence of Love is with us wherever we go and whatever we do. I believe that God works in truly mysterious ways and that even when prayer does not seem to be answered," it is still powerful and effective beyond our knowing.

So this particular sermon or reflection did not contain a special video, or PowerPoint slides. I didn't have a specific story to tell or a poem to offer. All I had was a passage of scripture and faith that if I started to type the words would appear, faith that if opened my heart and my mind inspiration would come, faith that if I let go of my sermon crutches, I would still be able to walk.

Faithfulness is being able to let go and let God. Faithfulness is trusting that the Essence of Love will hold us up and allow us to float even in a deep ocean of pain and doubt. Faithfulness is believing that we have been given the wisdom and the strength to make a difference in the world in which we live Faithfulness is knowing that no matter what happens we are not alone. Faithfulness is a gift from God. Thanks be to God.