

Faith Questions: Can I Remain Faithful? Sunday, 3/25/18

1 We're nearing the end of our Lenten journey, with each faith question we've asked taking us closer to the drama of Holy Week, closer to the crosses waiting at the end of the road. On Easter morning, we'll ask the big question on the other side of the cross: "Can I face life?" But until then, there are seven days yet remaining for us to travel in Lent, and one more question for us to ask of ourselves this morning. It's been a long road, but we've travelled it together on these Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights in Lent. Whatever you do, don't stop now. Don't get off this journey of reflection, this journey toward the cross, until we've journeyed with Jesus through the Last Supper, The Garden of Gethsemane, and the crucifixion at Golgotha. Only then will you be fully prepared to welcome the dawn of Easter morning, to face life with a reborn heart and a fresh resolve to follow the resurrected Jesus.

2 Our question for reflection today is "Can I remain faithful?" The answer, of course, is, "That depends." All of us know, in our heart of hearts, the ways that we have failed to be faithful- to our children, to our parents, to our spouses, to our churches, to our Savior. We come here every week to confess our sins and to receive the pardoning grace of God. So we know that we've all fallen short in the past. None of us know how faithful we'll be in the future, but I suspect that we all know there could be some situations that we'll face in the future that will sorely test our faithfulness. In fact, I imagine that some of us are facing situations like that even today. Some of us are asking ourselves, "Can I remain faithful?", uncertain of the answer, and looking to God for strength in the face of circumstances and temptations that threaten to overwhelm our strength. If that's you today, thank you for being honest. You came to the right place, because this morning we'll turn to God for the help we need, so that when we inevitably run out of our own strength, we can rely on the strength of the Lord to keep us faithful.

But first, let's check back with the disciples of Jesus, who were facing their own challenges to their faithfulness. In our last reading from the Gospel of John, the passage ended with the ominous exclamation of the Pharisees, "This is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!" How ironic that it's precisely the actions of the Pharisees in crucifying Jesus that cemented the certainty that all the world would in fact "go

after” Christ!

Just like a movie that reserves most of its time to the most consequential character development and action scenes, we’re going to fast forward now through Holy Week, from the day of the palm parade, with the joyful crowds and the angry Pharisees, to later in the week, to Holy Thursday. It’s on Holy Thursday that things really began to unravel for the disciples. Their misguided hopes that Jesus would stage a popular uprising crashed head-first into the realization of all that Jesus had predicted, that “the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and...must be killed.”¹ But they stiffened their courage and followed Jesus into Jerusalem, despite knowing that the Jewish Sanhedrin was looking to arrest and kill him. Little did they know that each one of them would also have a part to play in the betrayal of Christ. Each of them faced for themselves the question, “Can I remain faithful?” I’m picking up the story in chapter 26 of the Gospel of Matthew, beginning with verse 17 of the New Living Translation.

{Read Matthew 26:17-35, NLT}.

3 The drama of Holy Thursday began at the Passover meal in the upper room. This is Leonardo da Vinci’s portrayal of what we often call “The Last Supper,” completed in 1498. The chaos in the picture portrays the aftermath of the pronouncement of Jesus that someone would betray him, a moment in the upper room that apparently had never previously been the subject of a known painting.² It’s interesting to compare the four Gospel accounts of just what was happening at this moment. None of the accounts are very flattering. Mathew and Mark show us disciples who are more concerned with their own innocence than the actual betrayal of Jesus, as they all ask Jesus, “Is it me?” Luke shares an even uglier picture of the disciples as they fall to arguing about who will be the greatest among them- yet another Gospel irony, as Jesus prepares to demonstrate to them the true meaning of greatness.

Look at the agitated body language of the disciples in the painting, and compare them to Jesus, who remains calm even in the face of his imminent betrayal. Clearly, this was no ordinary Passover meal. But with the exception of Judas, the critical moment of decision had

¹ Mark 8:31, NIV (2011)

² <http://www.italianrenaissance.org/a-closer-look-leonardo-da-vincis-last-supper/>

not yet come for the other eleven disciples. That moment was to come in the Garden of Gethsemane. Mark, in his characteristically simple style, puts it this way: “Then everyone deserted him and fled.”³

4 It was on the way to the Garden that Jesus dropped the “D” word. “Tonight all of you will desert me.”⁴ There had, of course, been plenty of others who had deserted Jesus up to this point: The rich young ruler who went away sad⁵; The “many” followers who turned away because they couldn’t accept his teaching about eating his body and drinking his blood⁶; and even these same twelve who had fallen short so many times before. This last betrayal is harder for us to face because it’s so much harder to deny that we would have done the same thing. It’s easy to imagine that we wouldn’t have allowed ourselves to get sucked into a debate at the Passover table over who would be the greatest apostle. It’s much harder to deny that when the soldiers arrived in the garden to take Jesus away to his trial and death that we wouldn’t have scattered to the four winds along with all the others.

Can I remain faithful? Perhaps sometimes the answer is simply no. Perhaps there are some things that are simply beyond our human capacity to endure. Facing death by crucifixion may well be one of them. What is it in your life that’s threatening to overwhelm you? Is there something that makes you want to abandon everything, turn tail, and run for the hills? Has life dealt you a hand that you truly can’t handle?

On the other hand, Jesus was fully human, and Jesus endured the ordeal of the cross, remaining faithful to the will of his Father to the end. Is it possible that there’s something of Jesus available to us that might give us hope, even after our human strength and resolve have melted away into failure?

5 Jesus said something on the way to the Garden that gives me great hope that, even in those times when we fail in our faithfulness, we can find hope. While the disciples fretted about their impending failure, Jesus was already looking past their failure of nerve, past even his own death. “But after I have been raised from the dead, I will go ahead of you to Galilee

³ Mark 14:50, NIV

⁴ Matthew 26:31, NLT (2nd Ed.)

⁵ Matthew 19:16

⁶ John 6:66

and meet you there.”⁷ What a hope-filled sentence, and yet totally missed by the disciples who were still preoccupied with themselves. Jesus had announced his resurrection to the disciples long before, back in Matthew 16⁸, but there too they were so preoccupied with denying his death they couldn’t even process the hope of his resurrection. But there it was, as plain as it could be for them. Jesus would be raised, and he would meet them, forgive their unfaithfulness, and restore them as disciples.

The thing that makes it possible for us to face the question, “Can I remain faithful?” isn’t something inside ourselves. It’s not our character, or moral fiber, our strength of will, our level of education, the way we were raised, or anything of that sort at all. In fact, it’s really not even anything from our past. It’s all about how we can imagine our future. It’s the hope that when we do fail in our faithfulness, as we all inevitably must on this side of eternity, the same Lord who rose from the dead has the power and desire to raise us out of sin.

Failure, even the fear of failure, has a way of leading us to focus on ourselves. The more we focus on ourselves, the less likely we are to be able to follow our leader, Jesus. The disciples were so preoccupied with their own fear of failure that they couldn’t see the plain hope that Jesus was holding out to them. Hope of forgiveness. Hope of new life. Hope of restored relationship. Hope that their unfaithfulness would not end in death, but in new life. As we begin Holy Week today, our challenge is to take our eyes off of our own feet long enough to see that the Lord who is leading us to Calvary is also leading us to Easter morning and the power of the resurrection. But first we must follow him to the Garden and the cross.

⁷ Matthew 26:32, NLT (2nd Ed.)

⁸ Matthew 16:21



Buffalo United Methodist Church



...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!

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