

Sermon for Sunday, June 30, 2019

Keep the Faith

Well, after nearly fourteen wonderful and memorable years, it has come to this, my last time in this pulpit as your pastor. It has been an extraordinary ride, this time that we have shared in ministry and fellowship. We have, in my humble estimation, accomplished a great deal, from the mundane, like replacing the furniture in the Gathering Place, to the sublime, like installing this incredible organ and transforming this sanctuary for a new century of worship. We've helped build over ten homes with Habitat for Humanity, established an on-going relationship with Karla Koll in Costa Rica, and partnered with a host of worthy mission providers in the greater St. Louis area. We made seven trips to Houma, Louisiana to assist with hurricane recovery, made one trip to Joplin to assist in Tornado recovery, and have sent either 120 or 240 clean up buckets to Presbyterian Disaster Assistance each year for awhile now. We were major players in hosting the General Assembly last summer, and with our own sweat equity, repaired our cottage to host our new tenants, The Interfaith Partnership of Greater St. Louis. It breaks my heart that our Food Bank was shut down by Operation Food Search, but the Mission Committee is already looking into alternative ways for us to feed the hungry. And we have provided on a weekly basis, our best in our worship of God, and a music ministry that is without parallel. But beyond all of that of which we can be deservedly proud, and far more important, is that we have been the church of Jesus Christ, a place of worship, education, fellowship, ministry, and mission, where faith in God through Jesus Christ is celebrated, nurtured, relied upon, shared, proclaimed, and enjoyed. And it is that shared faith that has empowered everything we have accomplished.

Years ago, on a retreat for clergy, I was asked a question that I think every Christian should be asked, and which every Christian needs to be able to answer for him or herself. What is your ministry? What has God called you, specifically and uniquely, to do? My ministry is to love the church. I love the church as the people of God, the collection of precious individuals whom God loves, whom Jesus died for, and whom the Spirit guides, comforts, and empowers. That also means that I love each of you, and that is what makes leaving you so heartrending, because, as Thomas Lynch observed, "grief is the tax we pay for love."

I love the church as the body of Christ, as that communion of persons through whom God has chosen to reveal God's self, through whom God has chosen to speak, and through whom God has chosen to act. We are, by virtue of our faith, the representatives of Christ's body to the world. We are the embodiment of the risen Lord. To love the Lord Jesus, is to love the church which is his body. The two are inseparable, because the two are one. Paul said it nicely: "You are the body of Christ, and individually members of it." I love the church. Though fallible and imperfect, there is no Christian faith apart from it, period.

I love the church as the institution through which we, as followers of Christ, try to live out our faith. In other words, I love the Presbyterian Church. Like Paul, I will do whatever it takes to keep it together, to keep it seeking for the truth and integrity of the Gospel, to keep it faithfully representing Christ in both Spirit and practice, in both ardor and order. My ministry, is to love the church, in all its dimensions. And though this is my distinctive ministry as a pastor in the church of Jesus Christ, I know it is your ministry as well, and that you identify with it easily and heartily, and that is why it has been my privilege and joy to serve you.

I have always understood myself as a steward of the grace of God, and as a steward of the Christian faith, and I hope you do too. We stand in a long line of Christian saints who have devoted their lives to the gospel and to the church, made up of the many who have come before us, the many that now are, and the many who will come after us. This may not be the best of times for the church, or the easiest time to be the church, but it is our time to be the church. It is our time, as stewards of the grace of God, to keep the faith. And as I depart from your midst, it is now your time to keep the faith here. To help you do that, I want to leave you with some pearls of faith, pearls that I have found in my faith journey that I treasure, and which I hope will guide you and serve you.

The first is the most important. Forgiveness precedes repentance. Scripture tells us that “while we still were sinners, Christ died for us.” It is the unmerited grace of the gospel that forgiveness is offered before the sinner repents. If we expect the perpetrator of wrong to repent first, we are giving in to our misguided sense of justice that demands restitution. Justice in God’s kingdom is not fairness. It does not demand getting even in some way. It is not an eye for an eye, or a life for a life. Justice in God’s kingdom is reconciliation to the community that loves God and neighbor. Forgiveness makes that possible, or at least a prospect. Our willingness to confess our sin each Sunday morning as the body of Christian believers is grounded in this essential pearl of faith. It is at the heart of the atoning sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our declaration that in Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. To keep the faith, you need to forgive. Do that, and people will repent, that is, turn toward God and you.

The second pearl is closely related. We repent of bad faith, not of bad deeds. The Christian faith is not about making moral people; it’s about making faithful people. And what we learn from the Scriptures, and from our encounter with God, is that faith in Jesus Christ is salvific. It heals us, and transforms us into new creatures. Those new creatures, who have turned away from faith in other things and turned to faith in Jesus Christ, tend to demonstrate moral and ethical behavior, because they try to live out their faith in Christ. Righteousness in the New Testament is not defined as good works, but is instead defined as good faith. So the church is not the keeper of morals; it’s the keeper of faith.

The third pearl also follows. Jesus was not a perfect person; he had perfect faith. What makes Jesus distinctive, is that he was one of us in every way—he got angry, he got depressed, he got irritable, and he even got tipsy—but he always trusted in God even when he felt that God had abandoned him. It is his faith that saves us, and his faith in which we hope. Because if Jesus could remain faithful to God, than there is at least the prospect that we can too, because Jesus was one of us. That’s why our vocation, is to be keepers of the faith, and stewards of God’s grace.

A fourth pearl of faith is that redemption is a done deal. It cannot be earned, and it cannot be bought, because Jesus already earned it and purchased it on our behalf with his body and his blood. All we can do, is rejoice in it, and live in it. That’s humbling, because we like to earn our own way. But we can’t, and therefore humility is one of the marks of Christ’s disciples, of all those who keep the faith.

Knowing that redemption is a done deal, allows us to demonstrate the fifth pearl of faith: gratitude. In everything, the disciples of Christ give thanks. It’s why our sacramental meal at the table of our Lord, is a feast of thanksgiving. It’s not always easy to thank the Lord God for everything, like for senseless tragedy, for instance. But because we believe that God made good from the most senseless tragedy in the history of creation—the crucifixion of his beloved son—we can make good of the tragedies that befall us, and through faith, give thanks for them.

It follows—and this is the next pearl—that worship is not the “filling station;” it’s the “thank you note.” We enter each week into the presence of God, not to refuel, but to offer up a service of

praise and gratitude, and not so much for the week that has gone by, but for the week that is to come. That's why the faithful begin their week with thanksgiving, because they trust that God will fill it and them with every good thing. So the faithful come to worship not to get, but to give, to offer themselves up in praise and thanksgiving to the God who loves them, and they discover to their amazement, that when they give, they get. Their cup runneth over.

Finally this pearl: faith is a relationship. It is not knowledge. You can know everything there is to know about God, Jesus, Christian doctrine, and church history, and not have faith. It is also not a feeling. You can feel the spirit and experience many forms of religious ecstasy, and not have faith. Christian faith is a relationship with God, empowered by the Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ our Lord. It is therefore a relationship with the church, which is the body of Christ. You cannot have a relationship with Jesus without having a relationship with his church and its members.

Like all relationships, faith needs to be nurtured. It grows and matures as you invest time, energy, and heart in it. And the more you commit to this relationship, the stronger, and more powerful, and more joyful it becomes. There are no shortcuts to mature faith, even as there are no shortcuts to mature love in marriage, because faith is a relationship. Remember, that the church of Jesus Christ is the goal of history. We work toward and look forward to that great and glorious day when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, that day when everyone is in the church, and keeps the faith.

In one of his parables, Jesus declared that the good shepherd leaves the ninety-nine on the hill to go in search of the one lost sheep. While the parable is about the one that is lost, it also says something important about the ninety-nine that aren't. They are together, exactly where they are supposed to be, and the shepherd knows he can leave them, because they can sustain themselves, and protect themselves in the shepherd's absence. So it is that I leave you, the ninety-nine on the hill of Ladue Chapel, to keep the faith.

Thank you, for allowing me the high privilege of serving as your pastor, for allowing me into your homes and hearts. Thank you, for allowing me the joy of baptizing your children into God's family, of confirming them in faith, and of joining them in the covenant of Christian marriage. Thank you, for your presence in worship, for your patient listening to my attempts to proclaim the Word of God, and for allowing me to serve as the host of Christ's feast. Thank you, for the privilege of praying for you, and with you, and receiving your prayers. Thank you, for allowing me to call on you when you were ill, of considering my council when you were perplexed, and of honoring me with the task of shepherding our saints into the Church Triumphant.

Please, keep me in your prayers, even as I will keep you in mine. But above all, please, keep the faith.

PRAYER: All glory and honor and praise and thanksgiving be unto you O God, and to your Holy Spirit, and to your beloved son Jesus Christ our Lord, this day, and forever, world without end. Amen.

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Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church
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Romans 12:1-18; 15:13