

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, OCTOBER 3, 2010

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Scriptures: Luke 17:5-10; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Lamentations 3:19-26

## **THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD**

The word faithful and words like honor, loyalty, and nobility are words that are not as lived-up-to as they ought to be. Consider faithful or faithfulness. We hear so many stories of husbands and wives who are not faithful to one another, we hear stories about those who do not faithfully perform the duties they are hired or elected to do. Faithfulness to another person or to a job or even to a good cause is sometimes hard to find. There are our wonderful friends the faithful dogs, though, that give us good examples. Like the true story of Shep.

Shep was a border collie who followed his beloved master everywhere. When the man died in 1936, Shep followed the man's coffin to the train station in Fort Benton, Montana. When they refused to allow him on the train, Shep hung around the station yard and waited for his master to return. For the next six years, Shep checked every train that arrived at the station for his master. Tragically, Shep was killed by a passing train in 1942. His story was memorialized in a book titled Forever Faithful-the Story of Shep. He even has his own memorial with a large bronze sculpture of himself in a little park overlooking the river.

And there is the remarkable story of Omar Rivera, a blind man whose seeing-eye dog Dorado led him down 70 flights of steps to safety after the plane hit the World Trade Tower where he worked. Rivera tried to get the dog to leave his side and escape because he thought he would never be able to get out himself. There was so much flying glass and debris to climb around. But Dorado would not leave his master's side. Slowly and patiently the dog nudged his master's knee urging him on and inspiring many other people to keep moving as well. The journey down those

steps took over an hour, and they were no more than outside the building when the whole tower came crashing down. If not for his faithful friend, a Labrador Retriever, Omar Rivera's life would have ended on September 11, 2001.

What a joy it is to find faithfulness in our lives. We rejoice when we see faithful church goers, people who know the importance of worshipping God together with their Christian brothers and sisters, especially on a day like today— a day when we are painfully aware that many Christians in our world are not permitted to worship or to share at the table in the Eucharist which is a gift of Jesus Christ himself. And what a joy it is to see faithful parents who bring their children to be baptized, dedicated to God, who follow through with the vows they take raising their little ones to know Jesus. Faithfulness is a wonderful thing! And so is faith!

The disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith, and Jesus said, ""If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you." Jesus seems to be saying that faith is there for the taking, don't be shy, just take hold of that faith which is available to you all the time.

A popular television show from the past featured the husband and wife team of George Burns and Gracie Allen. Gracie was always causing George grief through her confusion over the simplest things. On one of the programs, Gracie became upset because her new electric clock kept losing time. She called a repairman who immediately discovered the problem; the clock wasn't plugged in. Gracie's response was, I know that. I didn't want to waste electricity, so I only plug it in when I want to know what time it is. The fact is, we often do the same thing with our faith. We plug it in only when we think we need it. But faith doesn't work like that. It needs to be lived each day, experienced in all of life, and used to grow closer to God. Faith in Jesus

Christ needs to be expressed and shared and rejoiced in! Living for Jesus is showing that our faith is alive and well.

It is interesting that after Jesus made the statement about faith, he goes on to give a little story about commitment, loyalty, and faithfulness. Jesus asks whether a servant who has worked all day in the field when he comes in at night will hear his master say to him, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Will the master then serve dinner to the servant? No, Jesus answers his own question. The servant will be expected to cook and serve the food and drink to his master before he himself may sit down to eat. Not only that, but the servant should not expect to be thanked for what he does. It is his job. The words seem harsh to us, and they even seem to be a reversal of some of Jesus' other teachings. On the night Jesus was betrayed, he who was called Master by his disciples, did an extraordinary thing. He took a towel and water and bent down and washed his disciples feet. The one who is the Savior of all, the King of Heaven, stooped to do the work of a servant.

So, what about this story where the master expects the servant to wait on him and serve him? When we make a decision to follow Jesus, our hearts are changed, and we *desire* to serve him in every way possible. We look at the one who gave his life for us; he, who is the perfect Son of God was made to suffer the ugliness and sin of the cross for our sakes. We consider what that meant for Jesus to do that for you and me, we who are so unworthy. Others have considered the meaning of Jesus and the cross, and they have understood that the great love of God shown in the giving of his Son has been poured out on them in their unworthiness. They have gone forth as servants in Christ's name, often burning themselves out in their work, all for the privilege of being his servant and doing their duty to Him.

Dr. David Livingstone was a Scottish Congregationalist pioneer medical

missionary with the London Missionary Society and an explorer in Africa in the 1800's. He became a legendary hero. This story has been written about Livingstone: A contingent of dignitaries and media people swarmed around him when he got off a plane in the U.S. They wanted to be close to and hear from this great, respected, heroic person--to their surprise, looking over many of their heads, Dr. Livingstone pushed his way through and around many of them, bent on some mission, not basking in his glory as they expected he would and should. Once free of the crowd, Dr. Livingstone strode to the side of a little woman with a child struggling with her baggage; humbly asking if he could be of assistance, he stooped to help with her burden. One of the writers nearby overheard someone say, "Now that is a sermon walking." Surely David Livingstone would echo the words of Luke 17:10, "I who am unworthy have only done my duty."

My friends, what better way to celebrate this special day of World Communion than to decide to willingly and joyfully perform our duty to the Lord each and every day by loving God and serving our neighbors in a spirit of love. You do not have to be a Dr. Livingstone or a Mother Teresa, because God has given to each of you your own life and your own service. The letter from Paul to Timothy which I read from earlier gives us an inspiring look at one way you might perform that duty. Paul commends Timothy for his sincere faith which was first demonstrated in his grandmother Lois and in his mother Eunice. Those women took seriously their responsibilities for teaching the scriptures and the tenets of their faith to young Timothy as he grew up. Timothy's father was Greek, a Gentile, whereas his grandmother and mother were Jewish. We do not know if his father converted to Christianity or not. We do know that Eunice and Lois led Timothy into faith, and he became a leader of the early church in Ephesus and Asia Minor, a missionary who traveled with Paul. You never know how the impact of what you say and do might transform the life of another human being. Today as we think about the blessings of baptism and the vows which all of us have taken, we know

that it is our duty before the Lord to fulfill those vows and be faithful to the promises we have made,

We all know what it is like not to live up to our promises or to feel that we have failed in some way. We also know that through Christ whose body was broken for us and whose blood was shed for us, we can ask for forgiveness and for help to go on to try again. How great it is to know that God is not like us. God does not break his promises. Jeremiah wrote the words we heard Jim read this morning from Lamentations, words he wrote in anguish because the Babylonians had come into the city of Jerusalem and destroyed it and destroyed the Temple as well. His spirit was broken for himself and for his people, yet he was able to write words of truth and hope which reach down through the centuries to each of us— “Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” Thanks be to God for His great faithfulness! Amen.