

“THE GRACE OF GOD IS NOT IN VAIN”—FAITHFULNESS

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 February 10, 2019

In my study I have a plaque that reads “Grace is when God gives us what we don’t deserve. Mercy is when God doesn’t give us what we do deserve. In our scripture this morning it reads in part...”Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand...But by the grace of God I am what I am, and [God’s} grace toward me has not been in vain.”

To remind you, Paul wrote this letter to the new church in Corinth. They were struggling big time without their spiritual guide. They were struggling with their environment. Surrounded by corruption and every conceivable sin, they felt the pressure to adapt. Paul heard of their struggles and wrote this letter to address the problems, heal their divisions, and answer their questions. Paul confronted them with their sin, and their need for corrective action and clear commitment to Christ.

We find ourselves at this moment in time with the same needs and as we turn to 1 Corinthians we find some of the answers. One thing he does for us in this text is to remind us of our core values. Even though we have differences these values are the essentials of who we are as Christians: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve, and to many others, and then to Paul himself. So Paul speaks to us through the Word, giving testimony of his faith in the Risen Christ. The resurrection is a historical fact. Then we share with Paul the hope that because of that knowledge one day we will see the living proof when Christ returns.

Until that blessed time arrives, we are called to FAITHFULNESS! The fruit of the Spirit is the word for standing fast, steadfastness, loyal, devoted, tried, constant, reliable, unwavering, trustworthy, dependable, resolute, honest, punctual, and steady. WOW! That is quite the quality of character. This fruit could also be call fidelity. It also speaks of endurance—a firmness of purpose, especially when the living is tough. It is more than a “grin-and-bear-it” kind of attitude.

It’s a very positive, active attribute of character and a much-needed one in today’s flippant, irresponsible world. The faithful person is dependable in

all kinds of life circumstances. This is a much -desired characteristic in others with whom we have any kind of relationship. We all need to be people of faithfulness!!

D.L. Moody said: “I believe in a faith that you can see; a living, working faith that prompts action. Faith without works is like a man putting all his money into the foundation of a house; and works without faith is like building a house on sand without any foundation.”

God is the source and standard of faithfulness which He has demonstrated in His dealings with the human race. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ models this same kind of faithfulness in relationships with his followers. The Holy Spirit is ready to bring this trait of character to full maturity in your life and mine...so that we, too, can be counted on to be faithful in all circumstances with all our relationships.

An old hymn that we sang this morning has much to say to us about faithfulness. Let’s turn back in our hymnals to “Great Is Thy Faithfulness’ in our Methodist hymnal p. 140 (or on the screen). We are going to look at each verse, reading it together and then sharing key words or concepts. *Read each verse aloud as a congregation and then allow time for the people to highlight key words or concepts found in that verse.*

Faith and faithfulness are closely linked—faith being foundational to all that we believe and act upon. Faith is that undefinable power through which we can realize as reality things that are as yet unseen. Faithfulness is the working out of this inner belief system. When we have faith in God, we act in faithful ways. Acts of faithfulness are the demonstration that we have a true faith in God and such acts are the threads holding our belief and behavior system together. As the writer has said, “faith without works is dead.”

Faithfulness is a vital part of the human being...in fact it’s so important that without it society will collapse. Every day demands from us an act of faith that propels us into countless actions which are dependent on the faithfulness of others. We eat food we haven’t prepared or checked out, we fly on airplanes that we trust have been examined faithfully, we trust our health to doctors whose training and background has been adequately prepared, we trust that others will faithfully obey traffic laws, we elect leaders that we hope will be faithful in duty, and on and on we could go. We live by faith and faithfulness because we have been created to live and function in such an environment of trust.

One reason for the lack of faith and faithfulness is that so many of us have been betrayed in our dealings and relationships. Without faithfulness functioning disaster is created. Some have trusted in medicine only to receive cyanide; we have trusted a banker and found out he was a crook; some have trusted a spouse only to discover a hidden alcoholic or adulterer; we have trusted an evangelist to later discover a charlatan. In all of this, there is one positive treasure—GOD IS ALWAYS FAITHFUL! He has no false advertising claims, no broken promises, no deceptive business practices, no tomfoolery behind the scenes, no spin doctors. GOD IS FAITHFUL!! It's the rock of foundation upon which we can build a life!

EVERYTHING we have is a God-given trust! Everything! Most of us are just average kind of folks, not spectacular, but we can all be faithful. So the bottom-line question is: WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH WHAT YOU HAVE BEEN GIVEN? Everybody has been blessed with something...everybody! It's not the gift that matters so much, it's how you use the gift you have been given.

Taking out the trash is not my gift. But I have to do it, or George does, since we are the only two around now. Of course when our children were home they would have insisted it wasn't their gift either! Now we do it so that we are not overwhelmed and buried in trash and garbage.

But there is a man who stops by his invalid neighbor's house three times a week just to empty his garbage. To him, it's a great joy of life, fulfilling this gift, taking out a helpless neighbor's garbage. Or you may have seen the TV coverage of 16 neighbors who made a pact years ago to be responsible for putting a handicapped woman to bed every night, taking her from her wheelchair and tucking her in. They are all men from the neighborhood who can physically lift this woman from the wheel chair and put her safely in bed for the night. Do you think they thought this was their gift? Some said they did it because of the peer pressure from the other guys and they didn't want to be singled out for not participating. But now they have been doing it for over a decade, being so blessed to be part of this ministry and they have done it faithfully!

As the congregation of Pine Bluffs United Methodist Church you have all been faithful witnesses to Jesus Christ as your Redeemer and Savior for many decades. God's grace has been, IS, evident toward you over the years and you continue to live that out in your lives and as members of this church! The banner that I am seeing right now over your heads states "Pine Bluffs United Methodist

Church, 1909-2009, 100 Years of Service”!!!! And we can add another ten years to that! You have been united by common ground with other believers. There has been room in the Methodist Church for differences but our core beliefs are the same. We all have been brought together by the God of Love, Grace and Mercy and that doesn’t change—even though some of the infrastructure of the church does and will. We are the same disciples and followers of Christ and part of this Family of Faith that has blessed us and continues to bless us in so many ways!!

Here’s the universal life-principle dealing with faithfulness: **IF YOU HAVE A GIFT OF TALENT AND YOU USE IT FAITHFULLY, GOD INCREASES IT SO YOU CAN DO EVEN MORE.** If you have a talent and refuse to use it, you lose it.

This is true of tennis, golf, singing, skiing, writing or painting, piano playing, or even thinking. The only way to keep what you have and increase it is to faithfully invest it in others and for the kingdom of God. Always at work is this law of “accumulative abundance”; “For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him” (Matt. 25:29)

FAITHFULNESS, as nurtured by the Holy Spirit in your life, is an absolute necessity for productive Christian living! It’s a hard, harsh truth, It seems to be negative until you look at the other side, the positive side. Think with me of the most joyful people you know...Quick, what is the secret of their joy? The most joyous people I know are the ones who never stop growing. When you give you get more to give. When you have an increase you have more to increase. When you use it faithfully, you get more to use! In short: Use it faithfully or lose it!

Kenneth Dodge of San Leandro, California, tells this story: In a small town in the Midwest, where I spent six years of my early youth, there lived a mentally challenged adult named Myron. It was during depression years and there was no place for Myron to be kept but at home. He lived with his mother and they managed to survive on the work he did as a gardener. Myron had the proverbial “green thumb” and the places where he did the gardening were easy to identify. The lawns, shrubs, hedges, and flowers all sowed with loving care, skill, and attention. Myron also did “volunteer” work. He cut grass, raked leaves, and planted flowers in what were unsightly vacant lots and for widows and others who couldn’t do yard work.

He was probably best known for his oil can. He always carried a small can of lubricating oil in his hip pocket. A squeaky door or hinge or wheel or gate always got a free dose from Myron's oil can.

Never a Sunday went by that Myron was not in church with his mother. Yes, we boys tried to tease him. He always got the better of us because he refused to be anything but cheerful.

Myron died a few years after I left to go to college. It was not easy to arrange, but I went back for his funeral. I was not prepared for what I saw. It seemed that everyone in the town decided to attend the funeral.

Myron had not achieved fame, fortune, or honor. But he had been a worker, an optimist, and most of all-FAITHFUL! He was a man who had made use of the meager gifts given to him. He had patterned for all of us the kind of faithful life that really matters.

The greatest commendation any human being could have bestowed upon him or her would be to hear the Master say: Well done, good and FAITHFUL servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. COME AND SHARE YOUR MASTER'S HAPPINESS!"

The psalmist Ethan, has the final word:

I will sing of the Lord's great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations. I will declare that your love stands firm forever, that you established your faithfulness in heaven itself (Ps. 89:1-2)

And the fruit of the Spirit is...FAITHFULNESS!!!