

## **Sermon: Old Faithful**

**Written by: Rev. Jessica M. Ashcroft-Townsley**

**Scripture: Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Luke 24:13-35**

Introduction to series:

Christians are called to be set apart from the world—to act and value things differently from the way the rest of the world does. We're given this command not just through Jesus's own words, but through the epistles of the apostle Paul. In his letter to the Galatian church, Paul notes the flaws inherent in us when we are living only according to the world's ways, and how that type of life looks when contrasted with a life which seeks to bear the good fruit of the Spirit. Paul notes that there are 9 virtues associated with this kind of living. From Galatians 5:22-23, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Over the next 8 weeks, we will take some time to focus on these virtues of the Spirit so that we might think more deeply about what it looks like when we are living like God calls us to live. We will talk about how it looks to love as if God's Spirit really does reside within us. Now let's hear today's scriptures.

Sermon:

Introduction: One of my favorite people on the planet is my Aunt Jen. She has always been someone I've looked up to, literally even, until I surpassed her in height as a teenager. Because she's just 12 years older than me, Aunt Jen and I have always been close. I was the kid who made her an aunt and we share many of the same sentiments and interests. Aunt Jen has always shown up for me and for the kids and now, even for my wife. She's a steadfast presence in my life no matter what is happening—a judgement free zone and a steady guiding hand. The reason I so admire her, though, is because of her bold, adventurous nature. I spent so much of my childhood wishing I could be more like Aunt Jen because she is not afraid to explore the world around her, venturing to places all across the globe.

When my family moved to Germany for two years, Jen made the trip twice to see us, taking us to explore places we may not have seen otherwise. Recently, she's taken up traveling on photography safaris, that take her to places like Oregon, Alaska, parts of

Africa, and even all the way down in Antarctica. Her goal, aside with going to every continent, is also to see every National Park.

One place on her list is Yellowstone National Park, a place that sprung into mind this week as I was thinking about the wonders of God's creation and reflecting on the natural world in preparation for our Earth Day celebrations later today. Yellowstone is famous, of course, for its geyser, Old Faithful, so named because it can be relied on to erupt at predictable intervals. This week, I learned that during these eruptions, this particular geyser sprays between 3700 to 8400 gallons of boiling water into the sky over the course of 1.5 to 5 minutes. While it isn't the only geyser in Yellowstone or even the largest one, Old Faithful is one of the most popular and the one which seems to be most predictable of them all. And it is that predictability, that reliability, that gives it the name "Faithful."

Faithful. There's a word we say a lot under this roof, huh? Faithful. But what does that word really mean? *Who* is faithful? When someone is characterized by their faithfulness, what would we say about them?

As a word-nerd, when I want to know about what a word means, I go where else but to the dictionary. Merriam-Webster defines faithful a few ways:

- as an adjective meaning steadfast in affection or allegiance. (a faithful friend, or someone like my Aunt Jen, for instance);
- is describes a firm adherence to promises of observance of duty (a faithful church goer, for example); it also points to
- something given with strong assurance – (a faithful promise), and lastly it can mean
- true to facts, to a standard, or to an original (a faithful copy).

In the Hebrew Bible (or the Old Testament), the word for faithful is used to describe a way of acting or being. It is an act of trust or loyalty. It is defined in relationships: God is said to be faithful to Abraham, as evidenced by Sarah's eventual ability to conceive of Isaac although she was barren. God is faithful to the Israelites, getting them from Egypt through the treacherous wilderness all the way to the Promised Land. The Psalmists, too, know something about faithfulness, describing a God who is steadfast in love, who

is faithful to God's people. David, himself, understood faithfulness in his relationship with God—that it was to be given *and* to be received. The prophets major and minor knew well how pivotal faithfulness was to their lives and work: without it, what would have become of all their prophesying?

I think faithfulness is mentioned so often throughout the scriptures, because it's not a simple concept, and yet everything about our lives depends upon it. Being faithful is not always easy; like things any relationship, faithfulness takes work. Above all things, faithfulness in the Hebrew Bible was not about the individual, but about relationship. It is a communal concept based on the idea of covenant, especially the covenant between God and people.

Knowing that God was faithful and seeing this demonstrated throughout their history, the Jewish people of Jesus's day were influenced by this particular understanding of faithfulness. Jesus often said that it was people's faith that had healed them, didn't he? "Your faith has made you well," he said to the woman who had bled for twelve years and was healed by touching just the hem of Jesus's garment. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus taught quite clearly that faith in God was the basis of both prayer faith and mountain-moving faith. For Jesus, it was this faith of supplication or petition that brought about miracles for people. John sees things a little differently. For John, it was the miracles of Jesus that brought about faith.

But, we're looking at faithfulness as a virtue of the fruit of the Spirit, so what is it that Paul means when, in Galatians 5:22-23, he uses "faithfulness?" In greek, faith is *pístis* a word with a slightly different meaning than the word for faith in the Hebrew. *pístis* is the term that describes a response to the preaching of the gospel. Christians, in Paul's view, become believers in the Good News of Jesus and thereby are made members of a household of faith. It is not just a communal thing, but also, for Paul, has implications for the individual. You can be weak in faith or strong—but faith can also grow.

Faithfulness is not a static thing, but something that, as in the Hebrew scriptures, requires something on the part of the individual. People change, and so can their faith. Above all things, Paul reminds us that because God is faithful, we must be also.

In our gospel lesson today, we find the disciples on the road to Emmaus. This is a famous passage, one of the most well known in all the gospels, one which locates some disciples in a state of bewilderment and grief. They have not yet seen the risen Lord and they don't believe the women who have delivered the good news of Jesus's resurrection. In their grief and disbelief, two of the men make the seven-mile journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus and a stranger comes alongside them, wondering what they're discussing. What they don't seem to realize for whatever reason, is that this stranger who listens to their story of little faith, the one who then speaks to them about Moses and the prophets and all the things in scripture that point directly to him as Messiah, that man they have encountered on this winding road *is*, in fact the risen Jesus who will be made known to them at the right time.

That time, miraculously, but not unexpectantly, happens in the blessing and breaking of the bread, for just as he had done on the night before he gave himself up to the Romans, Jesus made himself known to them over the sharing of a meal. At once, their eyes were opened and they saw Jesus for who he really was in that moment. It is only then that the men see and begin to preach the good news (after the women already have, I might add). The Lord is risen, indeed!

It would be easy to see the disciples on the road to Emmaus as faithless before Jesus comes to them. They've given up. They're going to go back to their boats and their nets. They're returning to the human condition. Gone are the days of their faith journey in which Jesus would teach them so many things. They walk that lonely road believing he had left them and did not seem to be coming back anytime soon. Yes, faithless, they might seem to us.

But what if we're wrong? Looking at this story, I think this *is* the story of faith. This is the story of the faith of Jacob and of Job, of David, and the prophets and Mary. This is the faith of all of us who have wrestled with God, who have questioned God, whose searching eyes remained open even when our hearts were breaking and felt without hope. This seven-mile journey to Emmaus *is* the story of faithfulness. It is the story of a people who struggle, but who do not close their hearts to their God. It is the story of a

God who seems remote, but who has never left her people. It is the story of faithfulness in the God who shows up, even when we don't recognize their presence.

The faithfulness God shows us through Christ will inspire faithfulness in his disciples. It's that faithfulness that carries the early church through all its growing pains to events like we read of in Acts today, with multitudes of people choosing to be baptized into the Way of Jesus. It's a faithfulness that will extend not just to their relationship with God, but importantly, to their relationships with one another. This is an individual faithfulness that will spread to the community, connecting hearts and spirits across time and space, leading directly to where I stand this morning and to where you sit today.

And in the end, that's what the fruit of the Spirit is about: these virtues, like faithfulness, allow us to bear good fruit not for ourselves, but for our community. Friends, we are made for community, not individuality. Christ shows up for the disciples on the road to Emmaus, making himself finally known in the sharing a meal with others: the ultimate communal act, a beautiful expression of faithfulness.

Every year, upwards of 4 million people visit Yellowstone National Park, hoping to gain an unforgettable view of Old Faithful as it erupts in sprays of mist that can reach 90 to 120 feet in the air. People go there trusting that they'll have an extraordinary story to share with the folks back home and a memory that will last a lifetime. And they will certainly have something interesting to say about this geyser. It will erupt while they're there, but not as reliably as they think: they'll have to be patient. The geyser can go off anywhere from every 60-110 minutes. And if they're there when it erupts, the gathering crowds can make it hard to get an unobstructed view. To see Old Faithful do its thing, folks will have to display one of the other virtues of the fruit of the Spirit: patience, just as the disciples perhaps should have done before they got themselves on the road to Emmaus.

But the thing about God's faithfulness to us is that God isn't expecting super-human strength in faith. God knows it is hard. God knows life throws us lots of curveballs and sometimes we're just along for the ride. But what we must remember is that amidst all our "Road to Emmaus" moments is Jesus, walking alongside us, waiting for us to open our eyes and see him. Amidst all that life throws at us is the steadfastness of the God in

whom we can indeed trust. Ours is a God worth being faithful to, a God whose love for us knows no boundaries. Ours is a God who calls us to faithfulness not just to them, but to all of God's people. And the greatest thing about our God is that we don't have to wait any time or stand behind large crowds of people to have a glimpse of her. In all of us, there is a God-like-ness. Just as Jesus showed up for the disciples on the road to Emmaus, God shows up for us today in all kinds of ways—including in the people we meet, in those we love, in the people who, like my Aunt Jen, keep showing up for us. Jesus walks beside us, always. It's left to us to have enough faith to recognize him, and then, model that faithfulness for others.

Amen.