

Third Sunday in Lent
March 24, 2019
1 Corinthians 10:1-13
“God is Faithful”

If I were to summarize all of today’s Bible readings into a single pithy phrase, I might choose three words from our Epistle. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:13 “God is faithful.” In truth, however, trying to summarize all these lessons in so few words could be considered mundane, because it almost trivializes the profoundness of God’s unending concern for His people. There should be, at the very least, one might think or hope, some kind of electrifying, attention getting assertion that arrests our thinking so that the grandeur of God’s concern is captured in all of its holy awe. Surely, the phrase “God is faithful” lifted from our text in 1 Corinthians 10 is true and should perk up our ears and hearts, but in fact it just may not happen. It seems the phrase falls under the legendary condemnation of having the quality of “the uncanny knack of pointing out the obvious.”

And yet, while it is true and more than obvious that “God is faithful” it is equally true that the phrase is somewhat bland. How ironic is that? The focus or pithy phrase to arrest our attention about the Creator of the universe does not even have the thrust of the old advertising slogan, “Where’s the beef?”

Nevertheless, the point is quite clear – all of Holy Scripture is the unending statement of God’s faithfulness in the presence of human unfaithfulness, and all the pericopes of this Third Sunday in Lent focus with laser beam intensity on the theme: God is faithful.

The Old Testament Lesson from Ezekiel 33 is an astounding conversation between God and His prophet Ezekiel. It begins with the declaration regarding Ezekiel’s call and responsibility toward the house of Israel and ends with Yahweh reiterating Israel’s complaint that “The way of the Lord is not just.” To which Yahweh adds, “O house of Israel, I will judge each of you according to his way” (Ezekiel 33:20). Ironically, the addition about judgment is an endorsement of the fact that “God is faithful.” He will do what He says, and that includes punishment as well as pleasure. But even more to the point is the whole conversation of Ezekiel 33 because it is God Himself talking about faithfulness on His own part, on Ezekiel’s part, and on the part of all the individuals in the house of Israel.

I don’t know what it would be like to have Yahweh say to me, “Hey, Steve, listen up you son of man!” I can’t say what my reaction would be but I’m sure it would include me paying attention especially when the Lord adds: “I have made you a watchman for all Israel” (Ezekiel 33:7). Certainly that would mean that a great deal of faithfulness would be required.

The truth is that the evidence that God is faithful is presented in, what is for us at least, a rather disturbing manner. We typically have a vision of God’s call to us to be faithful that is more romantic than real. But that’s not quite what is presented to Ezekiel. There is rather a sort of dressing down not only of Ezekiel but of all of Israel and the disingenuous attitude and behavior

of the whole community. It is the standard modus operandi of the people and prophets of Israel that has God calling them to give an account for over against His own faithfulness and loving guidance. The conversation/invitation/calling begins with a “boast” on the part of God reminding everyone about who does the assigning and judging of behavior. Israel and God’s prophets are notorious for questioning Yahweh’s behavior. “Why did you bring us out into this deserted place? Was it so that we may die” (Exodus 17:3)? In a way, Yahweh does a sort of role reversal in order to get the attention of His prophets and His people.

So the lesson begins with God asserting, “So you, son of man, I have made a watchmen for the house of Israel” (Ezekiel 33:7) and goes on to explain how that appointment is to be fulfilled and the parameters of what that faithfulness looks like. It includes, at the very least, a preaching of Law and Gospel to the people so that if they obey the prophet, they will be blessed, but if they do not, the people or individual will be punished – and severely because the penalty for sin is death. “But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul” (Ezekiel 33:9).

Yet the challenge does not end at verse nine. Rather it continues for another eleven verses, describing the nature of what needs to be done in faithfulness in light of the behavior of God’s people. The essence of the lesson lies in the attention-arresting declaration by the Lord about the pleasure of His own heart: “Say to them, ‘As I live,’ declares the Lord God, ‘I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel” (Ezekiel 33:11).

Now the last nine verse of the lesson – following the description of God’s heart – are quite explicit, bouncing back and forth between sin and grace with the intense echo of the death penalty to be exacted. Ezekiel hears that God know the hearts and complaining and griping of His people and how it is their misperception rather than God’s behavior that is the issue. “Yet your people say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just,’ when it is their own way that is not just. When the righteous turns from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it” (Ezekiel 33:17-18). And then the concluding verse drops the bomb: “Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ O house of Israel, I will judge each of you according to his ways” (Ezekiel 33:20). The important point in this section especially with regard to the theme that God is faithful is the double entendre that God is faithful not only in regard to forgiveness, but, also with regard to the Law. He will punish just as He vows that He will: “I will judge each of you according to his ways” (Ezekiel 33:20).

A similar sort of statement about God being faithful is more than evident in the Gospel of the parable of the fig tree and the question that the parable was designed to answer. The conversation in Luke 13 has to do with what seems to be inappropriate retribution for innocent people. Some of the people were wondering about Galileans who were murdered by Pontius Pilate while offering their sacrifices. Jesus takes their concern and even pushes the envelope a little further by extending the issue to include a number of people who died when a tower fell on them. At its heart, the conversation has to do with the idea that the assertion “God is

faithful” is suspect. Jesus does not confront the questioning, but rather turns to a story in order to open the eyes and understanding of the audience to the truth that God is faithful both negatively and positively, both in bringing the condemnation of the Law and the justification of the Gospel. The parable of the three-year impotent fig tree is narrated along with the condition that the tree will get one more year to produce some fruit.

As with the Old Testament reading’s theme of negotiation between Yahweh and His people, the conclusion of the parable is patience on the part of the owner in relation to the performance of the steward and the tree’s production because of the steward’s labor. The lesson closes with the twofold picture of the results of the Law and Gospel as regards God’s faithfulness. “Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down” (Luke 13:8-9). Again, the lesson is God is faithful – He will keep His Word.

The Psalm for the day reiterates the very same dynamic in the conventional poetic parallelism prominent in the Psalms. There is the back and forth of negative and positive of our actions and God’s response much like in Psalm 23, where we have the declaration: “The Lord is my shepherd...” followed by the consequence of that statement, namely, “I shall not want” (Psalm 23:1).

So too in Psalm 85, which does not reference the idea of punishment but rather celebrates the favor of God and the restoration of Jacob – especially in the last two couplets which state:
“Yes, the Lord will give what is good,
And our land will yield its increase.
Righteousness will go before Him
And make His footsteps a way” (Psalm 85:12-13).

So now it is time to focus on the central and thematic lesson of the day, the Epistle Lesson. The central concern of the text is the focus on knowledge of the past, so that when temptation arises, the capability to successfully resist will lie in the principle that God is faithful and “will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Corinthians 10:13) as did His people under the Old Covenant.

What Paul does is to cite a cloud of witnesses or a series of images so that the Corinthians will remain faithful in spite of the challenges and persecution they’re experiencing. Paul alludes to the exodus by referring to the cloud, the sea and the manna and the rock in a condensed history of how God is and was faithful while the Israelites questioned God’s presence and so we have in verse five: “Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness” (1 Corinthians 10:5).

He, Paul, then goes on to list some more examples that are intended to remind us to be faithful to God who Himself is faithful. The examples, in a way, call to mind the structure of the Ten Commandments with the “You shall not...” kind of phrase. Paul uses the “Do not...” or “should

not..." type of construction to overcome any ignorance about what will happen if the faithfulness of the covenantal people flags.

Then we have the summation of all the historical examples Paul has cited. In the last 3 verses we read: "These things happen to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and He will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation He will also provide the way of escape, that you may be in able to endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:11-13). And I will add, remember "God is faithful!"

In concluding with this passage that contains our overtly obvious conception that God is faithful, there is one really intensive phrase in verse 11 that perks, or should perk, our thoughts and especially our sense of responsibility. Paul notes that we are those "on whom the end of the ages has come."

Think about what a motivation that should be - the culmination of God's faithfulness is ever before our eyes and thoughts. No wonder Paul begins with "for I do not want you to be unaware brothers" and nor do I. My desire is that you are all aware...ever aware...that God in Christ has reconciled you to Himself...that you walk each day as His forgiven child...forgiven for all of your sin in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.