

Faithfulness – Susan M. Flanders, June 18, 2006
Ezek. 31:1-6, 10-14, Mk. 4:26-34

This morning I want to talk about faithfulness. Faithfulness - not faith in a set of beliefs or doctrines, but a way of living that is full of faith – faithfulness – faith – fullness.

I've chosen this because of an exercise the vestry did last weekend on our retreat. Claudia Tidwell and Wendell Rayburn, the co-chairs of the Strategic Planning Team, joined us on Saturday afternoon and engaged us in a values activity – an exercise designed to have us select 6 key values from a longer list and then try to agree on definitions for each value. These were to be values held by us and by St. John's, and, on a good day, values we act on! The winners, from a list of 18, were these six: Clear Communication, Willingness to Listen, Courage to Pursue a Vision, Hope, Compassion and Faithfulness. (Repeat) There's another whole sermon right there about how well we live any of them out – the real vs. the ideal, etc. – but that's probably better saved for Lent!

I've singled out faithfulness because I think it includes some of the others and because it's the one value of these 6 that might only come up in a religious context. I bet most office groups don't talk a lot about faithfulness. I've also singled out faithfulness because the readings point to it - at least obliquely – which is so like much of scripture – oblique – inviting us to wrestle and distill spiritual truth from it.

The prophet Ezekiel describes the prideful, faithless fall of nations who think they can dominate the rest of the world and show no deference to the creator, the creation, or other nations. This prophet has seen their eventual ruin – cut off from God and abandoned to decay. They have not valued faithfulness.

Jesus' teaching in Mark offers marked contrast – a seed, even one so small as the tiny mustard seed contains in it the power to grow – the life force only God can give. We do not fully understand it, and yet we can tend and cultivate and watch and wait and finally celebrate and enjoy the harvest. This – the work of tending and cultivating - is faithfulness – being true to a promise that comes from beyond ourselves.

Farming and gardening are wonderful metaphors for faithfulness, or, to put it another way, collaboration with God. This idea of collaboration with God has intrigued me since I was much younger and my children were little. They would ask me: “Does God make trees? – yes, does God make dogs, yes, does God make cars, no, or cake, no, or spaghetti?” – and on and on. We don't make mustard seeds, or any other seeds of the earth, or of our bodies, for that matter, but they grow. Seeds grow stealthily and hiddenly – deep in the ground, or inside a woman's body, or underwater – and they become – mustard trees, and babies, and oysters! These things come about without our invention, but we can help them grow, or we can prevent them. We have a shaping, not a controlling hand, in creation and in our

lives. To move beyond the nature metaphor, we shape our souls, our church, our world – but here too, we neither create nor control them. I’m reminded of a quote from St. Augustine from a few sermons ago: Without God, we cannot; without us, God will not.”

For me, this is faithfulness – our continuing attentiveness and response to what is going on – being open always to the work of the Spirit, and then building and nurturing and loving that which seems good and life-giving, and weeding out that which causes harm.

Faithfulness is a response to the wondrous experience of something from beyond myself – something I can call God, or Christ, or the sacred, the holy – such experience is not bounded by creeds or the names they assign. Our hearts are prompted – surprised or disturbed – love, trust, hope are born where we expected nothing – but were at least open. And then what? We can’t live in those moments. We have to live in the daily rhythms of real life – sustained by our sense of God’s presence when it has been most felt, and trusting always in new possibilities – for our souls, our church, our world.

To say better what I’ve been trying to say, I turn to T.S. Eliot, and a passage from his Third Quartet, the one called “The Dry Salvages”. Eliot evokes that larger reality we can only glimpse – as he calls it “that point of intersection of the timeless with time”, and that, as he writes, “is an occupation for the saint”. But it’s not for the rest of us, but rather this:

**“For most of us, there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time,
The distraction fit, lost is a shaft of sunlight,
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts. These are only hints and
guesses,
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.”**

This last, “prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action – is faithfulness. Not any one of these, but all of them together. Nothing about doctrine, just about how to be and live. Lest you wonder where Jesus comes in – for Eliot, Jesus Christ, the Incarnation of God in human flesh, represents this coming together – this impossible, yet real union of God and humanity – hints and guesses of glory and our work of faithfulness. Maybe Jesus represents this for you, maybe not - but we could do far worse in shaping our souls, our church and our world than living by these words. Prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action. Amen.