

2 Timothy 2:8-15

Remaining Faithful

Luke 17:11-17

October 9, 2022

It is the baseball time of the year, at least the playoffs. Like many other sports, competitors often use deception in order to gain an advantage. Pitchers throw curveballs when fastballs are expected. Not just in baseball, but also in life things tends to go more smoothly when they are according to expectations.

That is, perhaps, the reason behind the revolution of the last few decades in information technology. Information is designed to help us know what to expect; though sometimes all it does is overwhelm and confuse, and it can be distorted and manipulated. How many times have we found ourselves saying something like, “I didn’t see that one coming,” even when we thought we were well-informed?

Expectations reign supreme and one strategy is to guess what they are and go against them. Sounds like it might also be an effective teaching strategy.

Last week we were reminded that Jesus was a teacher, and sometimes used interesting strategies to convey his lessons. One of his strategies can be seen in the telling of parables, where he often tried to introduce the unexpected, like a pitcher throwing a curve ball in a fastball situation.

For instance, after the Parable of the Talents, when one might expect him to say, “from the one who has

much, some will be taken and given to the one who has little,” he instead says, and very provocatively I might add, “to the one who has, *more* will be given, and from the one who has little, even what he has will be taken away.”

Unexpectedness does not have to imply something bad. Good things come unexpectedly too and life is full of pleasant surprises. Those whose job it was to see something like the attack on Pearl Harbor were taken by surprise, as was the whole world when the “Iron Curtain” fell and down came the Berlin Wall. One “miss” is considered bad, and the other good. But any way one accounts for it, life is often unexpected and many of its happenings have this quality, we didn’t see them coming.

That sense of surprise caught my attention when I first read the text from 2 Timothy 2:8-15. In it, there is what Paul calls, “a trustworthy saying,” but looks like a poem of sorts, or maybe a set of lyrics.

“If we die with him, we will also live with him
If we endure, we will also reign with him
If we disown him, he will disown us;
If we are faithless . . . “

and here, what seems best for the logical progression of things, is to say that in some way God will become faithless too, if we don’t keep our end of the bargain, God will *also* not keep the bargain, but this is not what we read. Instead,

“(God) will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.”

Much of the bible is spent setting up the truth claims that are at the center of what is called; “gospel.” Every now and again we catch a glimpse of that center, and this is one of those times. The general idea is that when God makes a promise, it will be kept. And in a covenant relationship, where both sides have made promises, like in a sale of something, God will be true to the promise even when *we are not*.

Thus the idea is born that even though the only way to apprehend salvation is through faith, it is essentially not *our* faith that saves us, but God’s faithfulness, which can be trusted, even when our own cannot. This is the mystery of the gospel. We might think of Jesus on the cross as God being faithful. In addition to being surprising, it is truly good news.

The gospel reading also contains surprises. One day Jesus came upon a group of people known as lepers because they suffered from one of several skin diseases that caused them to be excluded from the religious life of the people. They had also been excluded from the life of their family and larger community. Upon request, Jesus healed their diseases and sent them to the priests to be re-instated. One returned to express gratitude.

There is more than one surprise in this story. The first is that Jesus interacted with lepers at all; the second is that he healed them (even though we have gotten

used to Jesus healing people, at the time it would not have been expected). And finally, the third is, of course, and the one that many readers might noticed first, is that only one of them returned to give thanks.

Here we are in October when the season of fall festivals and harvest traditions is gearing up and nearing full swing; the idea of gratitude will rightly be drilled again and again into our consciousness. We are taken aback by the ingratitude of the other nine, perhaps even more than by the thankfulness of the one.

But do not be too hard on the other nine. Let us see how when we experience something good at a moment in our lives that vulnerability had crept in and we feared something bad, we may indeed experience genuine thankfulness, and take time to express it. And our expression may include more than words, but generous action of sacrificial giving. Or we may rush off to get on with our lives, almost as if nothing has happened.

And absent a moment like that, we also may not be so forthcoming with gratitude or generosity. Every morning when the earth spins around for another day and the soft Ohio clouds blow in from Lake Michigan to temper the early fall sun, we are prone not to notice and go on without giving thanks at all for the magnificent gift of life to which we have returned for another day.

Or, failing to recognize that every breath we take is an act of God's mercy, worthy of our praise; and at long last, how every new day, new month, new year, is an extension of God's remaining faithfulness, reaching beyond the bounds of our endurance, given in a love that never ceases, we are prone to imitate the nine, seeking to get on with our lives as if nothing happened.

Something *has* happened, of course, and the idea of God remaining faithful even when we are unable centers us in grace, and produces in us gratitude, without which life is diminished, missed, like a good curveball when a fastball is expected.

We don't want to miss anything. So let us be encouraged by every unexpected goodness, like when the ten lepers were healed and given back their lives again, and also the everyday expressions of God's remaining faithfulness, like when the sun came up for another beautiful day and the air was crisp and clear and color than has to be seen to be believed blesses our lives, like when Jesus died a sacrifice for us, and for the world.

To the Glory of God.

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