Almost Boring
A Sermon on Matthew 21, Philippians 3, and Exodus 20 by the Rev. Philip Major
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For the past six months I have been describing our journey as a journey through the wilderness. Though many of us find beauty and inspiration in the wilderness, there is a reason why most of us do not live in the wilderness full time. The wilderness is a dangerous, unpredictable place.

These recent days and weeks feel like an especially dangerous and unpredictable time in the wilderness. We turn to God who is the source of our strength and peace. We turn to the words of Holy Scripture for wisdom and perspective on our situation. In this dangerous, unpredictable time we try to act faithfully.

Faithfulness is not usually the focus on television, or in music videos, or in the movies. Faithfulness is not profitable. Faithfulness is not exciting or sexy. Faithfulness will not make you popular, but faithfulness is the way of Christ. Today we have read four passages from scripture. Each one brings us different ideas of faithfulness.

In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus teaches us the meaning of faithfulness by negative example. This is similar to what we have seen in recent days and weeks; the most powerful lessons about faithfulness come from those who have not acted faithfully. Just as we have been shocked by much of what we have seen and read in the past several weeks, the parable told by Jesus is shocking. When the tenants saw the son of the landowner, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.” So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

We are shocked by the violence of this passage, and that is the first point. Violence and aggressiveness are attractive to people in some way. People keep watching the bully to see what he might say or do next. Violence and aggression might sell newspapers and magazines and books and movies, but violence and aggression are never part of faithfulness.

Compared to those best-selling books and prize-winning movies, faithfulness is almost boring. The faithful person is not pushy and violent. The faithful person does not act rashly. The faithful person is persistent, because they are motivated, not by attention or popularity, but by love. The faithful person is steady, because their strength comes from God, not from the cheers of the crowd or from adrenaline.

Jesus’ parable of the tenants provides a second negative example of what faithfulness is not. The tenants of the vineyard feel entitled. This is a parable about entitlement. The tenants feel entitled to keep all of the fruits of their labors. They feel entitled to everything that has been given to them and to more.

Entitlement is a sin that leads to violence and tragedy. Feelings of entitlement are like weeds; entitlement is not content with what has been given but grows and spreads, like weeds in our hearts. The tenants assume they can simply seize things that do not belong to them. The tenants assume they can overturn the rules that have been agreed upon without any negative repercussions. Jesus responds to the people who feel entitled: Therefore, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.

The faithful person is not entitled. The faithful person acts with humility. The faithful person acts with generosity. The faithful person understands everything they have is a gift from God. The faithful person is grateful for what has been given. This generosity, contentment and humility may appear to be almost boring. This humility, gratitude, generosity come to us when our hearts are strengthened by God’s love and when our minds are resting in the knowledge of God’s peace.

In the rest of our scripture readings we find more negative examples of faithfulness, that is opportunities to learn what it means to be faithful by describing what it looks like when people are not faithful. In our passage from Exodus, Moses receives the ten commandments directly from God. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. Don’t kill people. Don’t do things that will break your marriage. Don’t steal. Don’t lie. Don’t deceive others.

The faithful person is not the rule breaker. The faithful person shows respect for other people by following the rules. Once again, this list is well known, and the ideas are common and reasonable. These ideas of faithfulness could appear to be almost boring.
The critical movement is to understand we find our strength and our peace in God. This is the crucial movement depicted in Psalm 19. The psalm proceeds, verse after verse, a hymn of contemplation and praise. The prayers culminate in verse 13: *Above all, keep your servant from presumptuous sins; let them not get dominion over me; then shall I be whole and sound, and innocent of a great offense.*

Just as we found in Jesus’ parable, we see the clearest picture of what it means to be faithful by seeing the opposite. *Above all, keep me from presumptuous sins. Keep me from presuming that I am right while others are wrong.* The faithful person is not proud. The faithful person is not sure of himself.

The faithful person is one who confesses their sins. So the holiest day of the year for Jesus was Yom Kippur, or the day of atonement. This year, our Jewish sisters and brothers observed Yom Kippur this past week on Sunday and Monday. I noticed that even some who might describe themselves as less religious observed the holy day. That is because the day of atonement is the central festival of the Jewish year.

Atonement and confession are central to faithfulness. The faithful person is aware of their many faults and offenses. The faithful person is a person of prayer. To those who do not examine their own mistakes, to those who do not apologize for their offenses, the faithful person might almost seem boring. However, those who pray, those who examine and repent of their sins, find God’s strength and God’s peace.

The Apostle Paul gives us a final negative example to help us understand what it means to be faithful. When I first began to study the New Testament, I was quite bewildered by this passage from Philippians, among many others from St. Paul. It appears that Paul is boasting. Here, and also in 2nd Corinthians, Paul is engaging in a bit of a game with some members of the church; let’s call it the boasting game.

*If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Some members of the church have been boasting of their greatness, their status, perhaps of the honors they have received. Paul responds by engaging in their game, so they might see that they are being ridiculous. Sometimes Paul sounds absurd, and that is the point. Paul says, “You have many reasons to boast. I have more. Yet I regard all of my achievements and status as rubbish. Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not being right on my own, because of my adherence to the law, but being made right by the faithfulness of Christ.*

The faithful person does not boast of their accomplishments or status. The faithful person is not concerned with honors bestowed by others. The faithful person is not concerned with their status in human institutions or with the titles affixed to their name. The faithful person does not think they are right because of things they have accomplished.

The faithful person understands that each of us has great value, not because of anything we have accomplished, but because we are God’s children. The faithful person lives as a person of great honor, not because they are exceptional, but because we are loved by God. The faithful person finds great joy and grace in life, not from having accumulated great power and wealth, but by giving away their power and wealth so that others have more.

There are times when we see fifty in a worship service or five people at a Bible Study and we feel distressed. Especially for those of us who worshipped with five hundred people in attendance, we can be discouraged about the fact that worship is not the most popular option for most people today. Don’t be discouraged. Don’t be distressed. Faithfulness has never been the most exciting option. The church that follows the way of Christ, who gave himself to death on a cross, has often been strongest when it seemed to be weak. If we are faithful are hearts are finding strength in the love God; our minds are finding peace in the knowledge of God.