

Faithfulness: A Fruit of the Spirit

Dr. Lal Hmingliani Browne

Ruth 1:15-17; Galatians 5:22-26

We are still on the sermon series: "Fruit of the Spirit." Today the topic is **faithfulness**. *I want to explore with you what it might mean for us. What is faithfulness? How do we get it? How do we sustain it? What does it mean between God and us? ... and between you and me? How does it work, not just in good times, but in hard times?*

I could start this sermon with a story. I could tell the story about **faithfulness** where a widower dies and goes to heaven and discovers the streets are indeed paved with gold and there are all kinds of vehicles driving along them. Every person has their own vehicle. (This is the American version of heaven.) At the Pearly Gates, the man is grilled by St. Peter on his **faithfulness**. He says he wasn't perfect but he never actually cheated. He might have noticed some women, he might have had some thoughts, but he never acted on them. St. Peter told him, "Well, that's not so good, but then it's not so bad. You don't get a Rolls, you just get a Chevy."

So he walked down the row – past the Rolls, past the Mercedes, past the Cadillac's, past the Lexus – until he finds his Chevy – no air conditioning but then this is heaven not Florida and you don't need air conditioning. He drives down the road admiring the sights and other cars and vehicles. Suddenly he sees his wife and then ... shocked! She is pushing her way along ... on a skateboard!

I could, but won't tell that story. Because, the Bible lesson today itself is the story that illustrates the message of **Faithfulness**. **Faithfulness** is unfailingly acting with strong loving gracious loyalty to

someone or something, regardless of difficult/extenuating circumstances. Today's Bible story is of a woman named Naomi ('Pleasantness'). She has a husband, Elimelech ('God is King') and two sons, Mahlon ('Infirmity') and Chilion ('Wasting Away'). They become refugees. They flee a famine in Bethlehem and go to Moab. While there for ten years, the two sons marry Moabite women: named Orpah ('Stubborn') and Ruth ('Friend'). Then famine comes to Moab. Naomi's husband and sons all die. Naomi decides to go home to Bethlehem where there is now plenty of food. As she leaves, Naomi tells her daughters-in-law to go back to their mother's home.

As we see in the picture on the bulletin cover, Orpah goes back and we see her departing into the distance. The other daughter-in-law, Ruth, remains **faithful** to her mother-in-law, Naomi. Ruth is bold in her **faithfulness** and says,

*'Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people, and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!'*

Amazingly, Naomi makes no comment on Ruth's promise of **faithfulness**. In effect, Ruth was promising Naomi, "I will be your daughter forever." Naomi is wrapped up in her own trouble.

So Ruth followed Naomi home to Bethlehem. Ruth is as **faithful** as her word and proves her loyalty again and again. Meantime, Naomi becomes bitter telling her friends, to call her Mara ("Bitter"). She spends her time questioning God's **faithfulness** to the point of saying:

'Call me no longer Naomi ('pleasantness'), call me Mara, for

*the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.
I went away full, but
the Lord has brought me back empty;
why call me Naomi ("pleasantness")
when the Lord has dealt harshly with me, and
the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?'*

Naomi's questions and complaints seem out of place. It seems an indulgence in a time when attention ought to be on survival not balances of justice. I look at the story and wonder what is going on? I come to see that this is an intentional and instructive paradox. Naomi is able to be bitter because she completely trusts in Ruth's **faithfulness** to her. Like a child that throws a tantrum because he or she trusts their parent's love, Naomi knows the depth of Ruth's daughterly love and **faithfulness** towards her.

Naomi believes in her daughter-in-law, Ruth's love, so she feels free to complain. She is no longer alone – Ruth is with her. Not a husband. Not a son. But she will never be alone. She now has a daughter for life. She has a place to which to return. She has a people among whom she belongs and friends who will hear her complaints. She has the God who has claimed her as his and has declared that he is her God.

I can understand Naomi's childish complaints to God. I went to Bible College in India at age 18. I complained because the studying was very difficult. It was all in English and I didn't know English. I had to pursue classmates to tell me what the professors had lectured in the classroom. Little did I know God was teaching me how to recruit others to help!

One day, my cousin, Mawia, visited me. He had just graduated from seminary and was going home. When he came to visit me, I was packing my bags to quit and follow him home.

*He said, "No, you're not quitting."
I said, "Yes, I am."
He said, "No, you're not."
"Yes, I am." (I can be quite stubborn!)*

*He said, "NO, you are NOT!
I said ... (pause) ..."It is too difficult to study in English. I am going home with you."
He said, "No, you're not. God called you to study his word here. Until you study so hard you faint 7 times a day, you are studying here."*

He then put his hand on my head and prayed for me to remain **faithful** to God's call. Then, he went home. I unpacked my bag. I stayed. I studied. It took me an extra year – but I did it and I did not faint. By the way, that cousin is now Bishop Mawia of the Methodist Church in Myanmar.

Naomi complains, yet she holds on to Ruth and through Ruth to God. Later in the story, Naomi guides Ruth to make that life-changing connection to a relative – a rich relative – named Boaz ("man of strength.") Then Boaz, by the grace of God, saves them both by marrying Ruth and fathering a son.

While both Ruth and Naomi strive for **faithfulness**, neither of them makes it on their own. Both need the safety of each other's **faithfulness**. **Faithfulness** is not something one can be by one's self. Both need Boaz. And, both of them need God. Ruth, the Moabite enemy, becomes Israel's model of **faithfulness**!

Naomi, the good Jewish wife has become - 'Mara/ bitterness.' She is, however, given a **faithfulness-by-association** from God's **faithfulness** and from Ruth's **faithfulness**. God has been **faithful** to Naomi all through her life. God gave her a husband who took her away from famine. God gave her two sons through one of whom God gave her Ruth. Ruth is **faithful** to Naomi even when all legal obligation has ended when her husband died. Because of God's **faithfulness** and Ruth's **faithfulness**, Naomi dares to trust God enough to complain to God. When Naomi is holding her grandson and acting as his Nanny, she returns to herself. She is, again, 'Naomi, pleasantness itself.'

Like Ruth and Naomi, all of us are surrounded by

layers of relationships. Some of those surround us with **faithful** safety. Some prove unworthy and cause harm. We are called to move forward in the context of the relationships that are **faithful**. The deepest and most **faithful** relationship is our relationship with God. As Psalm 117 tells us, **“For great is God’s steadfast love towards us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures for ever.”**

The Ruth and Naomi story illustrates the point that the Spirit of God gives us the Fruit of **Faithfulness**. That **faithfulness** gives us permission to work out our own **faithfulness** to God and one another. The Fruit of the Spirit called **Faithfulness** - is the paradox we need to press on. Ruth’s **faithfulness** leads to her becoming the great grandmother of King David and a forbearer in the lineage of Jesus.

Two months ago today, my sister Nutei was hit by a bus in Bangkok. Will and I left quickly to help her. We prayed for God’s **faithfulness**, mercy, and healing. We knew we were out of our depth. And, God was **faithful** and arranged that everything we needed fell in place:

- Kind people were where we needed them.
- Pastor Steve cared for me when I ran into his office crying. He sat me down and prayed for my sister Nutei and family. He gathered the staff and they prayed for us.
- The bus driver proved a man of integrity and was the first to call for medical help.
- The insurance company paid up without objection.
- The medical staff at the Police General Hospital proved both highly competent and compassionately understanding regardless of language barriers.
- People we did not know showed up to support and help and pray with us.
- The mostly Buddhist staff at Courtyard by

Marriott, from the doorman to the manager, cared for us like compassionate family members. They made the hotel a safe place for us despite the military coup then going on in Thailand.

- The Myanmar embassy officer helped us fill out the right forms to get a visa.
- Thai Airways gave extra care and attention.
- All the while you, who are my brothers and sisters at Church of the Palms, prayed and prayed and your prayers were answered. And,
- God was **faithful** to us many times over.

Psalm 117 came alive for me. (Psalm 117:2) **“For great is God’s steadfast love towards us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures for ever.”** We thank and praise God for that steadfast love towards us.

Nutei, is making great progress, but still has a long way to go. She took 20 steps with help yesterday. We go forward relying on God’s continued **faithfulness** and your continued **faithful** prayers.

I began by saying I wanted to address some questions. I want to be **faithful** and actually answer them.

*What is **faithfulness**?* **Faithfulness** is unfailingly acting with strong loving gracious loyalty to someone or something, regardless of difficult/ extenuating circumstances.

How do we get it? **Faithfulness** is not something we get on our own. We get it in relationship with God and with others. It is meaningless apart from relationship. If we are like Job’s wife and do not see or trust the relationship with God, we say, *“Curse God and die.”* If we are like Job and see and trust God, we will remain loyal to God even when we do not understand and even when we press for answers.

*How do we sustain **faithfulness**?* We sustain it through prayer and practice, trusting God’s steadfast

love towards us and his **faithfulness** every day.

What does it mean between God and us? It means we are in a relationship with God that is for all time and is always good and is marked by love.

What does it mean between us today? It means our relationships are holy because they are the place where we learn the love and **faithfulness** that is at the heart of our relationship with God.

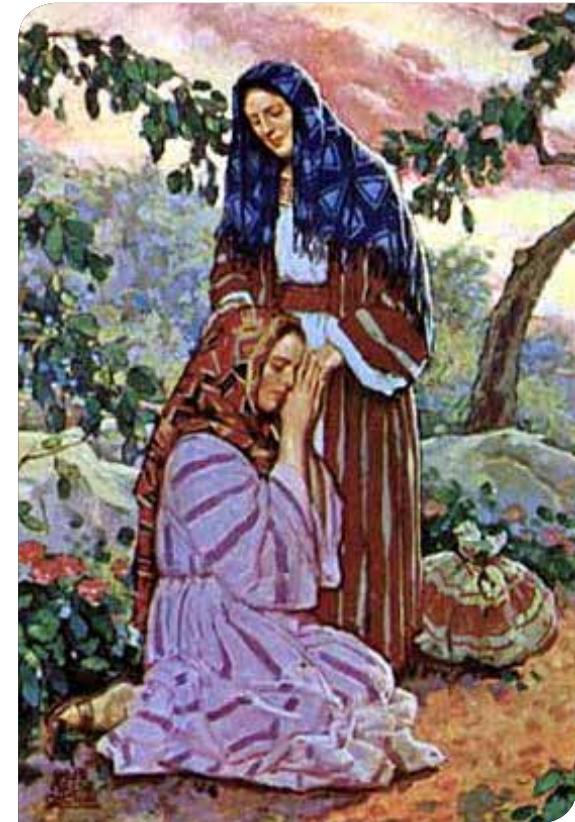
How does it work, not just in good times but in hard times? **Faithfulness** works by grace and the work of the Holy Spirit within us – heart, mind and soul. As Paul says in Romans 8:28, **“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”** Our job is to love and trust God. God is good all the time and his **faithfulness** endures forever!

Amen.

Faithfulness: A Fruit of the Spirit

Dr. Lal Hmingliani Browne

July 27, 2014



Church of the Palms
a community of faith . . . a way of life

3224 Bee Ridge Road
Sarasota, FL 34239
941-924-1323