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Fruit-full: Faithfulness
Psalm 36; Lamentations 3:19-23; Galatians 5:22-23
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One day, when I was living in Overland Park, a minivan I didn't recognize came to a stop on our street. It was only there for a minute or two, and then it pulled away. Shortly after that, we noticed a dog running up and down the street, no collar, no leash. He clearly didn't belong to any of our neighbors. All the way up the street he ran, then all the way down, then all the way back again, and just kept going, all afternoon. We eventually figured out that this dog had been dumped on our street by somebody who, for whatever reason, did not want him anymore. Rather than take him to a shelter, the owners had simply dropped him off on our street. They probably chose our neighborhood because we weren't too far off the highway, and it was easy to get away before anybody realized what they were doing.

It would break any heart to see this innocent, trusting animal frantically running around looking for his owners. Fortunately, there was a family down the street with four clever children, who banded together and persuaded their parents that it was time for them to get a dog. So, Jack, the dog, found a fantastic new home before dark that night, which may well be what the original owners hoped would happen. But for many abandoned animals, things don't work out so well. And this keeps happening, because human beings are unfaithful. . .

Have you ever told someone a deeply personal secret, and then they shared it with someone else? Have you ever had someone take credit for your ideas, or caught someone talking about you behind your back? Did you ever think someone HAD your back, but when you really needed them, they were not there? Did someone ever promise to love, honor and cherish you, until death do you part, and now that person is with someone else?

Faithfulness has to do with making and honoring commitments. They say losing a child is the worst pain a person can have, and I believe it, but surely number three or four is the experience of betrayal. The dad who never pays child support, never takes his child on the promised outing; the unfaithful spouse; the daughter who verbally and financially abuses her elderly mother; the trusted colleague who throws you under the bus; the pastor or priest or coach who sexually abuses a child.

I suspect that even worse than being betrayed is the guilt and shame of knowing—really knowing—that we betrayed someone. I have been on the receiving end of infidelity before, and as bad as that was, I would far rather live with that than live with the knowledge of having done that to someone else. This may sound odd, but being cheated on has actually increased my sympathy for those who have cheated, and have allowed themselves to realize the enormity of what they have done. Because how awful for you, to have caused your loved ones such pain, and to have to live with that.

It's hard to be faithful sometimes. If it was easy, we wouldn't have classic songs like, "Heard It Through the Grapevine," and "Run Around Sue," and 80 percent of country music. The best of us have made promises we could not keep, and made commitments we did not fully honor.

In scripture, the word "faithfulness" is almost exclusively used in relation to God. People fail, but God is rock solid. When Abraham and Sarah were senior citizens, and with no biological children, God promised that their descendants would outnumber the stars in the sky. And God came through when Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was in her 90's. God takes God's time in ways that make us crazy, but God comes through. That's why the first part of the Ten Commandments goes like this: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of

Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.” Before commanding them anything at all, God reminds the people, “I can be trusted.”

In our two Old Testament passages today, we have these wonderful images of God’s faithfulness. In Psalm 36, we read, “Your steadfast love extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds.” In those days, that was just about as high as anybody could imagine. I was reminded of that children’s book, *Guess How Much I Love You?*, where Little Nut Brown Hare is trying to tell Big Nut Brown Hare, how much he loves him—as wide as he can reach, as high as he can hop, and all the way to the moon. But as Little Nut Brown Hare falls asleep, Big Nut Brown Hare says, “I love you all the way to the moon . . . and back.”

The author of Psalm 36 is writing a song that might as well be called, “Guess How Much God Loves You.” In human relationships, the faithfulness of one person in the relationship is often impacted by the faithfulness, or lack of faithfulness, of the other. It’s almost like a set of scales, with one side affecting the other. God’s faithfulness is independent of human faithfulness, and no unit of measurement can capture it.

In the reading from Lamentations, there’s that delicious phrase, “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” Here, the Lord’s faithfulness is a never-ending, five-star buffet, constantly being refreshed and refilled.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, and FAITHFULNESS. One of the foundational messages of this sermon series is that God has created us to be fruitful. One image I’ve had in my mind all throughout these past weeks as we’ve been reflecting on the fruit of the Spirit and what it means to be fruitful, is the lemon tree I used to have right outside my kitchen door in Southern California. I’ve mentioned this tree to

you before, how I could step outside the door and grab a lemon whenever I needed it, and how awesome it smelled. I've come to realize this tree bore Meyer lemons, which are a cross between regular lemons and mandarin oranges. So they are extra sweet, but still very lemony. Looking back, I also realize this was a very old, very mature tree—at least ten or 12 feet tall, which is impressive for a lemon tree. It produced such a glorious overabundance of lemons that they would fall on the ground. When people came over for dinner, I'd send them home with a bag of lemons as a party favor. And I frequently served lemon chicken.

The point being, it's the mature trees that bear the most fruit. Younger trees can't do it. Even when they are well established and start to bear fruit after two or three years, their output cannot compare with a strong, deeply-rooted, well-watered mature fruit tree (I find this very encouraging, as I prepare to leave my 40's behind). I believe this is true about all the fruit of the Spirit, but I see a special connection between maturity and faithfulness. Faithfulness is a quality that is revealed and proved over time.

We've been saying all along that the nine different qualities listed in the fruit of the Spirit are not things we need to work on. It's the work of the Holy Spirit, not us. But there are things we do that make room for the Spirit to come in and till the soil, including praying for enemies, paying attention, letting go of our own agendas in order to be part of God's agenda, challenging ourselves to practice kindness in new ways with new people, and most recently, keeping away the pests that threaten our generosity, which include comparing ourselves with others, giving with strings attached, and fear of not having enough. We left off last week with a question, which was: what can we use as repellent to keep away those pests? There are no wrong answers, though I have personally found nothing that drives away comparisons, strings, and fear better than daily expressions of gratitude.

For faithfulness, we help the Spirit produce it with daily choices about our commitments. Telling the truth, following through, keeping promises, persevering. Hoping. The Spirit can work through all these things to grow a beautiful, ripe, golden faithfulness. We catch glimpses of it in the children who keep caring for their aging parents, even when the parents can't remember their names; the foster parent who perseveres with a difficult child; the dog who waits patiently for her human to come home; the worker who shows up on time every day for a job they hate because it puts food on the table for their family; the spouse who deletes their Facebook account rather than continue any more online flirtation with their old high school flame; any time any one of us does what is right when every fiber of our being wants to do what is convenient. And each glimpse shows us a fraction of a sliver of God, our Father and Mother, whose faithfulness is new every morning. The Spirit wants to produce faithfulness in you and me, and each day we can make choices that give the Spirit room to do it.