

The Fruit of Faithfulness - The Spirit of Speech
092312 Sermon
Acts 2:1-12

We are continuing our series on the Holy Spirit and this week we are talking about the Fruit of Faithfulness. I have tied it in with the Spirit of Speech, so this week we will look at *our* faithfulness to God and next week we will look at *God's* faithfulness to us. The Bible speaks a lot about God's faithfulness to the people.

When we speak of the Fruit of Faithfulness, it seems pretty important to have an understanding of what we're faithful to. The Christian church is pretty good at disseminating doctrine. We can produce all kinds of lists on what to believe: we have our covenant as a church, we have creeds and those sorts of things. All of these promote doctrine. I want to suggest, though, that doctrine is secondary to what we believe and our faith. Doctrine comes about as a result of our personal experience of God and our relationship to God.

We are dealing with two different ways of knowing. Our personal experience is subjective, and in the Christian faith that experience is built on forgiveness and redemption. We have an experience of forgiveness and an experience of redemption as a result and then we act on them somehow – we make a covenant with one another, we come to church on Sunday, we pray together. We respond on the basis of that experience we have had.

On the other side, we have a relationship with a loving God, a God who sends his Son because he so loved the world. We have our subjective experience and we have the objective, spiritual reality of God. What creates faith is the Holy Spirit bringing that personal experience and that universal relationship together in such a way that we are honoring something much deeper than ourselves, so we can speak from our own experience and the objective reality of God's love. It is an unusual and special melding of these things into what we call 'spirituality'.

So when we are speaking about our faith, when we are acting on the fruit of faithfulness so that people know where we are coming from, we are working within that confluence of personal experience and the universal reality of God. Our readings today suggest that the Holy Spirit opens us to the possibility of speaking on behalf of God and for the sake of others. We come forth and do things like the apostles in Jerusalem. Paul puts it this way in 2 Corinthians:

But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with Scripture, I believed and so I spoke, and we also believe so we speak because we know that the One who raised the Lord Jesus Christ will raise us also with him and will bring us with you into his presence.

Having faith means speaking of faith and going out and speaking about it. There is what we do, which is important, and then there is what we say about what we do. Back in the ancient world, it is important to understand that words have power; words did things and changed things. So what you said reflected who you were. We don't live like that anymore. Words tend to be separated from who we are in some arenas, and in others they are not so separated.

We have expectations toward some things. Remember the author James Frey, the author of *A Million Little Pieces*, when he was on Oprah? He presented his novel as a true story, and then it turned out that almost nothing in the novel was true. Oprah called him on it and he took a lot of heat for it, but he said, "I am a fiction writer and the words I put on paper are not intended to be correlated with who I am." He was telling Oprah that it was her mistake, not his, that she believed it to be true. Frey admits to being deliberate in his shading of fiction into reality, and reality into fiction, but this is the kind of culture we

live in now with words.

Back in Jesus' day, words had power, words had meaning and words changed things. We read in Isaiah about his call, and the Lord calls him to speak, to be a prophet to the people of God. Just a reminder, prophecy is not predicting the future. Prophecy is speaking God's word into the midst of difficult situations. Isaiah is called to preach God's word into a very difficult situation and he has a vision of being called. This is an image or reflection of that subjective experience and universality of God's love coming together in an individual. Isaiah is called to go forth and he says:

Here am I, Lord, send me.

We, as people of faith, resonate with Isaiah's words. When we are speaking from the fruit of faithfulness, what we say matters. Part of what we say as people of faith is that God is a forgiving God and we speak to God's forgiveness with others. We see that in Isaiah when he says, *Woe is me, I am unclean*. Then Isaiah is cleansed by God with the burning coal touching his lips in such a way that when he speaks, Isaiah is speaking God's word.

We, through our baptism and through Jesus Christ, have been forgiven, so the thing about speaking from God's forgiveness is having the knowledge that we, ourselves, need forgiveness. People who don't need forgiveness don't speak of God. You need to be in a state of needing forgiveness in order to be forgiven, which seems self-evident. Nonetheless, we have an act of forgiveness every month in our participation in communion. In Matthew 26, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it, he broke it and gave it to the disciples and said, *"Take and eat. This is my body."* And he took a cup and after he blessed it, he gave it to them saying, *"Drink from it, all of you. For this is my blood of the covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."* Every month, and ideally, every day, we are acknowledging God's forgiveness.

When we are speaking from the fruit of faithfulness, we are speaking from Christ's love for us, which speaks to our acceptance of God's forgiveness. We have been forgiven and then we accept that forgiveness and we go out and speak in the same way the Psalmist speaks: *"For your steadfast love is before my eyes always and I walk in faithfulness to you"*. We know we walk in a new reality. We know we walk in a new way when we know we are forgiven and we accept that forgiveness of God.

All of this leads to our redemption. When we testify to the faith, when we speak from the fruit of faithfulness, we are speaking about our redemption.

But what does it look like when we don't say those things, when we do the opposite of this? It can get pretty ugly. There is a good story from way back in the ancient world told about Rabbi Hillel and what it means to not speak from the fruit of faithfulness.

Shlomy and Hymie were friends who had a falling-out. Hymie dropped his ethical guard one day, and started saying mean things about Shlomy to a number of people. The next day, remorseful, he asked his rabbi what he could do to make things up. The rabbi responded with an odd directive: take a feather pillow, slice it open, walk up to your roof with it, and let all the feathers go in the wind. Hymie shrugged, but the rabbi had never let him down before, so he did it. Hundreds, thousands of little light feathers went fluttering off to who-knows-where. Hymie then went back to the rabbi and said, "Now what?" She responded, "Now, go clean it up—pick up every one of the feathers, and put them back into the pillow-case." Hymie laughed at the utter impossibility of this instruction—some of the feathers must be all the way to Catonsville by now! But suddenly, he stopped laughing; he realized the moral of this exercise—there is no way to contain the damage done when we spread "the evil tongue."

—Adapted from Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb's telling and Wikipedia

When we are not speaking from the fruit of faithfulness, when we are not allowing God's forgiveness and Christ's love to be expressed, this is the story we end up with. This story reflects the times when we speak in such a way that we are not lifting one another up, because God's love and Christ's forgiveness, those lift up people, those seek out the best in people. We hope for those things regardless of what people have done to us.

That is where it gets hard - lifting people up and seeking the best in others, regardless of what they have done to us. How do we still speak God's forgiveness and Christ's love with them? How do we speak to our own redemption in God's love?

We speak faithfully based on our experience of forgiveness, and we know we are speaking faithfully when we speak into a difficult situation and are speaking unity into separation, love into hate, speaking harmony into the midst of discord, speaking reconciliation into the need for retribution, and speaking redemption into the fear of failure. These things tell us when we are speaking from faithfulness, when we begin to see those good fruits arise.

Matthew 10 says, "*When they hand you over, do not worry about what you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you at the time. For it is not you who speak but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.*" Do we trust that the Holy Spirit will speak through us, especially in difficult times, when relationships are hard, when we are consumed with mourning for a loved one, when we are faced with difficult diagnoses, when trouble comes upon a community? Can we trust the Holy Spirit will speak with and for us? Are we walking in that objective reality of God's love?

The Holy Spirit calls us to a common faithfulness, a common devotion; something we all agree to and come together to be with. This is a gospel of forgiveness and a prophetic word of God's love. Whatever it is we are dealing with, we step into our life as a church by saying with Isaiah, "*Here I am, Lord, send me.*" We do this knowing our reality is Christ's love and God's forgiveness. Amen.