

13 October 2019  
Pentecost 18

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“The Faithful One in an Unfaithful World”

Text: 2 Timothy 2:1-13; Ruth 1:1-19a; Luke 17:11-19

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

We heard from St. Paul today, in his letter to Timothy:

***If we are faithless, he remains faithful—  
for he cannot deny himself.***

He is faithful. Christ Jesus. Faithful through and through. Not a faithless bone in His body. A man perfectly faithful. Both to His Father and to us.

Faithful. Keeping every word spoken. Fulfilling every promise. Doing everything He says He’s going to do. Faithful birth, faithful life, faithful death. Reliable. Dependable. Solid.

Even when that meant going to the cross for you.

But we need to back up. We’re not there yet. Because long before that God was faithful to you. God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. All of them, perfectly and consistently and always *for you*.

Even when we are faithless. Like Adam and Eve in the Garden. Faithless. No faith in God’s Word. No faith in God’s promise. They were convinced - and they convinced themselves - that what God had spoken was not true. They weren’t going to die. It’s just a fruit, after all! But die they did. Turns out, this death wasn’t just true, but even worse that they thought. And they plunged a world into sin with them. God’s Word was not only true, but powerful.

***But even if we are faithless, he remain faithful—  
for he cannot deny himself.***

So God did not cut ties with His children. Their *less* meant Him *more*. They were faithless, so He was faithful even more. He who had given Himself to them and made them in His own image, came to them. Pulled them out of their hiding places. Reconciled them to Him and to each other. He forgave their guilt and covered their shame and gave them life again. A faithful Father to His children. His love would let Him do no less.

But this Father was not only faithful to His children, but to His Word. Death was now in the world and it had to be dealt with. But not by His children. They couldn't. The dying can't defeat death - only the living can. The living one. And so He would. God Himself would take the guilt and shame and death His children had welcomed with open arms - or at least open hands and mouths. He would die, not them. He would lay down His life for his children. **Faithful.**

But God, who is life in Himself, cannot die. But God must die to save His children. So another promise He makes - He commits Himself. One of Eve's children would be the one. But not one of Adam's children. Only Eve. He would have another father. A heavenly one. And so be both God and man. God to save. Man to die.

That's the promise, that's the faithfulness, a certain young woman heard about. A false-god-worshipping young woman named Ruth, when some visitors from Judah came to her land to escape a famine. She married one of them, and she heard from them of a faithful God, a God unlike hers or any other. A serving God. A promising God. A loving God. A God who keeps His Word. Not a God you have to please and appease. Not a God you have to find your way to, but a God who finds you and comes to you. **A faithful God.**

She heard of how this God was faithful to Abraham and gave Him a son. How He was faithful to Jacob, and brought his family out of their slavery in Egypt. How He was faithful in giving them a land of their own. And she heard the promise of a Saviour. Yes, there was a famine in that land now, but so it happens in a world plunged into sin and death. **But God is faithful.** He did save. He would save. He will save.

So when Naomi told Ruth and her sister-in-law to stay in Moab once the famine was over and she was returning to Judah - that land promised and given by that faithful God - how could she? This faithful God had come to Ruth. She wasn't going back.

And then we find out this young Moabitess not only heard about God faithfulness and believed, but was part of God's plan and became a part of God's faithfulness. For from her, from her descendants, came King David himself. And from King David, the Son of David - the promised Saviour.

The promised Saviour who one day found Himself walking in the no-man's-land between Samaria and Galilee. No one much inhabited this place, this borderland which marked the place where Jews avoided Samaritans and Samaritans avoided Jews. Unless you had to. Unless there was no place else for you to live, because you were a leper. Because you were death incarnate; the walking dead. Where for lepers, death was only a matter of time.

But that's true for all of us, isn't it? What we don't realize is that this is how *all of us* look to God, who sees what we cannot see. You think you look good, healthy, strong. And by worldly standards maybe you are. But since the day you were born, the leprosy of sin has

been eating at you. And one day it will consume you. With lepers, you could just see it.

But for Jesus, Pharisees, disciples, kings, lepers, you, me - all the same. When he sees us, **He sees what He came to be**. For that's what it means that this one, Jesus, came to take our guilt and shame and death - He becomes what we are, so we might be what He is. That was His promise, way back in the Garden, and He is faithful. **Faithful for the faithless**.

*Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!* is their cry, these ten lepers. Music to Jesus' ears. *Go show yourselves to the priests*, He replies. Why would they? Because in that charge is the promise of cleansing. That's the only reason you would go to the priests. And . . . promised fulfilled. Cleansed they are. By the faithful God who always does what He says.

Even here. Here, where we cry out the same words from leprous, sinful mouths: *Lord, have mercy!* And He does. Here, promise fulfilled. Here, sins forgiven, bodies and souls cleansed, by the Jesus who bore those sins and uncleanness on the cross. In mercy, taking our guilt and shame and death. In mercy, giving His forgiveness and holiness and life. For you and me, for our unfaithfulness.

For have you not heard? I know you have. The promises. The works. The cross. The promises fulfilled. And yet death is at work in us. Sin. Unfaithfulness. You see it in marriages, spouses who are unfaithful. Cheating, adultery, pornography. You see it in families, among friends. Words given, promises made . . . and then broken. You see it in pastors unfaithful to their ordination vows. Unfaithfulness we know. Unfaithfulness is all around us. Unfaithfulness is in us. Words, promises broken. Sin indulged. God doubted.

So you know, then, the joy of Ruth when she heard something different. You know the joy of the lepers when the Jesus who is life entered their world of death. You know the joy of Paul, when this faithful Jesus rescued him. You know the joy of this faithful Jesus who has come to you and rescued you, too. This Jesus you can count on. Faithful through and through. Not a faithless bone in His body. Keeping every word spoken. Fulfilling every promise. Doing everything He says He's going to do. Reliable. Dependable. Solid.

Even when it meant going to the cross for you.

***If we are faithless, - unfaithful - he remains faithful—  
for he cannot deny himself.***

**He cannot deny Himself.** That's the key. *Outside* of Him is a world of unfaithfulness. A world of sin. A world of denial. A world of broken promises and death. The world we see. But in Him . . . is life. In Him is no denial. In Him is only faithfulness, cleansing, and forgiveness. In Him is only yes!

And in baptism, you are in Him. So all of that is yours. His forgiveness yours. His mercy yours. His cleansing yours. His holiness yours. His life yours. Even in your body wracked with sin and death. Remember how I said earlier that Jesus sees us all as sin-lepers, dying in our sin? Well, baptized into Jesus He sees us all in that way now. As sons of God. Clean. Holy. Living. Dearly loved. You may not see yourself that way, but He does! When Jesus looks at you now, He doesn't see the sinner, He doesn't see a disappointment, He doesn't see a failure or somebody who's hopeless. He sees His child He loves. He sees His child He died for, rose for, and lives for.

So when we sin, He restores us. Repentance isn't a four letter word or some sort of awful torture, it is simply us being the sin-lepers we are and rejoicing that the Lord of life has come here to us with His life. Repentance is our way of saying: *we're dying! Give us life.* And He does. **Faithful.** Promise fulfilled.

And more. He feeds us who are hungry. Bread of life. Bread that gives life. Eternal life. Bread that is His life-giving-once-crucified-but-now-risen Body, and wine that is His Blood. To feed the life He has given. To live in the one He has saved.

And this, Paul says, is **trustworthy**. Worthy of your trust. That is, your faith. In the midst of a world of unfaithfulness. Here is the one you can count on. The Jesus who is faithful.

So maybe like Adam and Eve, you've doubted God Word and thought to yourself: it's just a little sin, after all! Or maybe like Ruth, you've been living in a land full of false gods, and maybe you've even had a few yourself. Maybe like the lepers you feel like an outcast from this world and life; separated from the living; living without hope. Maybe you're like Paul, attached to the end of a chain - except for you, what imprisons you is an addiction, a sin, a bitterness, a hurt, you can't set yourself free from. Or maybe you've hit some other rough patch. Maybe you're all of the above.

If so, good news for you! **You have a faithful God.** He sees your sin, your leprosy. He knows it better than you. And He says to you: *I forgive you all your sins.* In fact, they're not even yours anymore - **they're mine**, He says. I've made them so. I've taken them upon Myself. You are free. Free from guilt. Free from shame. Free from the tyranny of death.

And so free to live. To live as the child of God you are. Free not to go back to your old ways, like Ruth. Free to go and show yourselves to all people as the cleansed and forgiven child you are. And free, like Paul, no matter where you are. Because you have a faithful God who has kept His Word and all His promises. For you.

So now you - **rise and go; your Jesus has made you well.**

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.