Great is God’s Faithfulness

The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA

February 24, 2019

I. Intro

In seminary, people joked that the optimum sermon structure was comprised of three points and a poem. I think today I will reverse that and begin with the poem. This type of poem is called a “Limerick.”

There once was a preacher named Kay  
She always had too much to say.  
    She read all the books (i.e. commentaries)  
And explained all the hooks (i.e. the meanings and ideas)  
And her sermon took up the whole day!

Ha Ha! You've been warned!

Realizing that this would probably be the last time I would have the opportunity to preach to you, I have thought a lot about what I wanted to say. After two-and-a-half years with you what do I most want to have you remember? So, I decided to share with you my thought process toward the answer to that question.

II. Joy

One of the comments that I have received frequently this past month is about my smile and my joy. I do enjoy laughing with people and having fun. But that kind of happiness depends on your circumstances. If you are having fun, you are happy. If you are having troubles, you are not happy.

Joy that does not depend on circumstances comes from knowing that Jesus is your Savior and your Lord, and that God is sovereign over all that happens.

I want, more than anything else, for each one of you to know Jesus Christ personally, the same way you know your best friend. I don’t mean to know about him, the way you know about Abe Lincoln or Winston Churchill. I long for you to know Jesus, to know what he is like, to spend time with Jesus by reading the Bible stories about Him, to know what matters most to him, to hear him talk and to watch as he cares for people. I long for you to believe His Truth, to obey His commands, to have New Life – like Zacchaeus, or Matthew, or the blind man or the woman at the well. I pray that you will experience first-hand his mercy, his grace, his forgiveness, and his faithfulness.

III. God’s Faithfulness

The joy that shines in me is a reflection of God’s love. My joy developed during 50 years of living in God’s faithfulness. Often you don’t even recognize God’s work when you are in the midst of it. It’s not until the end, when your life is all sewn together and the pieces become one great quilt-picture that you finally recognize that God has been there all along. God has faithfully been at work in your life, walking beside you through all those years of struggling.

This quilt, displayed next to the pulpit, is my testimony to God’s faithfulness in my life. I began the quilt as part of a class at a quilt shop in New Hampshire in January 1998. This is called a calendar quilt because each of the blocks represents or illustrates a month of the year.

IV. Stars

The first block I made was the star at the top. It reminds me of the summer my family went camping in Franconia Notch, NH, to see the Perseid Meteor showers. It was better than the Fourth of July! Crowds of people in lawn chairs and blankets looked at the sky. Every time a shooting star blazed across the sky, everyone went “Oooh” and “Aahh”. It made me think of Psalm 19:1,4 - “The heavens are telling the glory of God; the skies proclaim His handiwork. Their voice goes out into all the earth; their words to the ends of the world.”
V. Deer

The February quilt block is the deer leaping over the snow. February was also the month that my husband of 20 years told me he loved someone else and was leaving. So, for me this block brings to mind Psalm 42:1,2,5.

“As the deer longs for streams of water, so longs my soul for Thee, O God. My soul thirsts for the living God… When shall I see Thy face? My tears have been my food day and night… yet I ask myself: Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.”

I longed for answers to all my questions. I wondered why God let this happen to us, and why He didn’t answer my prayers the way I wanted him to answer. And I cried for our loss.

Over time I was able to place my hope in God, and He provided and guided me faithfully during those difficult years. This quilt became my therapy for the next twenty years. As I stitched every piece by hand, I talked with God in my head and reflected on the evidence of God’s faithfulness. He provided a series of jobs and child care and new friends.

My first job that year was taking phone orders at Christian Book Distributors during the Christmas season. Just as that job was ending, I was hired by a Christian school to teach middle school math for the rest of the school year. What a disaster that was! Everything you see middle school students do on TV they did to me. Spit balls, stealing one another’s pens and breaking them open, spilling perfume, talking while I was trying to teach. What a nightmare! By the end of that school year the principal and I came to a mutual understanding that teaching math was not my gift. I was looking for a job again.

VI. Butterflies

The third quilt square is of several butterflies above a lake.

Have you ever watched the life cycle of a butterfly? In a way, that is what my life has been like. The caterpillar hatches from an egg, and eats voraciously, growing larger and larger. At the right time it spins a cocoon and appears to die. Days and weeks go by, until one day the cocoon begins to wiggle and shake as slowly the creature inside struggles to escape. The crumpled butterfly emerges and slowly fans its wings, pumping blood into its veins. At last the adult butterfly spreads its wings in the warm sunshine and flutters up into the sky.

If you cut the cocoon open thinking you are going to help the butterfly get out, it will die. The struggles are essential to get the blood into its wings and strengthen them enough to fly. Metamorphosis is the term for what looks like the death of the caterpillar in order for it to be changed into a butterfly.

VII. New Life

What a metaphor for our lives as Christians!

In the Bible the Apostle Paul talks about the need to die to self, to give up the old habits of selfishness, gossip, greed, resentment, envy, power-seeking, lustful thoughts and so forth. The Holy Spirit works within us to change us to be more and more like Jesus – to be filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

It’s as if your old self is wrapped up in a cocoon and dies when you believe that Jesus died on the cross so that your sins would be forgiven. When you ask Jesus to forgive you and you give your life to Christ, the Holy Spirit starts working inside you to change you into a brand-new person inside, just like that butterfly. You are not the same anymore. The old is gone and the new life has begun!
VIII. Network News

An acquaintance of mine published a monthly Christian news magazine for our region. She hired me for ten hours a week to write articles and maintain the website. But that was not enough to pay our bills every month. One day I was sitting on the sofa flipping through the Yellow Pages of the phone book trying to find another place to work. As I began to cry, I prayed to the Lord for help. The phone rang while I was praying - one of my friends had recommended me to a minister who was looking to start a women’s ministry in his church. He was calling to see if I would be interested in applying? That position as Director of Women’s Ministries was twenty hours per week, which dovetailed perfectly with my job at Christian Network News. I discovered that I loved being involved in ministry by, for and with women. The two jobs together paid enough to cover my bills.

IX. Flowers

It felt like God was speaking to me the words of Jesus in Matthew 6: “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear... Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them... See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even King Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these... so do not worry, saying, “what shall we eat?” or “what shall we drink?”... Your heavenly Father knows that you need them. Instead seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness and all these things shall be given to you as well.”

Look at the quilt again. See the flowers to the right of the butterflies? That fourth quilt square reminds me again and again that God is always faithful, and he has promised to care and provide for his children.

X. Church

In the lower left corner of the quilt is the most important symbol of all: the church with its steeple pointing up to God. By the year 2002 I finally surrendered to God’s will. It was time to be ordained. I had been searching for a position in a Presbyterian church, but there are only about 12 Presbyterian congregations in all of New England. It felt hopeless.

Finally, I realized that I had not fully surrendered to God. Then I had to pray: “OK God. If it is your will, I guess I am willing to move, to leave my home, my friends, the town where my kids grew up, the coast of Massachusetts which I love so much – I am willing to give them all up to follow you anywhere.”

It was then that the Holy Spirit reminded me of Psalm 32:8,

“I will instruct you, says the Lord, and guide you along the best way for your life. I will advise you and watch your progress.”

And so, God did lead me. I was called to a Presbyterian church in Oreland, outside of Philly, where I served for 7 years. During that time my daughter graduated from college, then my son graduated from high school and he went off to college in Rochester NY. God answered my prayers to choose a husband for me, and God re-connected me with George Balderose. We were married in the spring of 2009, and I moved back to Pittsburgh.

God’s timing was perfect. I began going to church with my husband. After only a couple of weeks, the senior pastor announced to the congregation that they were looking for a temporary supply associate pastor. I was called, and served First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh for 7 years. Just as that position was ending, I was called to come to The Church of the Covenant. God’s faithfulness was evident in the way he arranged for all of the transitions to happen at just the right time for the next opening.
XI. Finishing the Quilt
I completed the quilt top here in Pittsburgh. My travels were over and God brought me home. The little cottage in the top center block has a wreath on its door that is actually the pin of the Balmoral School of Piping and Drumming, which George directs from our home.

I have been so blessed all my life by God’s faithfulness, that I figured out how to stitch the words to the second verse of “Great is Thy Faithfulness” around the burgundy border. The words are:

Summer and winter and springtime and harvest,
Sun, moon and stars in their courses above
Join with all nature in manifold witness
To Thy great faithfulness, mercy and love.
Great is Thy faithfulness, great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see.
All I have needed Thy hand has provided!
Great is Thy faithfulness Lord unto me.

XII. What I wanted most to tell you:
Now that God has closed this chapter of my life and I am leaving COTC, I want most of all to pass on to you the Joy of the Lord.

Jesus loves you. Jesus died for you so that your sins could be forgiven when you put your faith and trust in Him. Jesus is good and kind, wise and compassionate. Jesus knows your every weakness, your every sorrow, your deepest pain. Over and over and over again the Bible quotes promises that God will be with you through the storms of life: the floods, the fires, the persecution and sickness, the loss of possessions, the death of a loved one. Jesus will laugh with you and cry with you. He will never leave you alone.

Pray to Jesus today. Confess your sins – your own specific sins. Say to God, “I am sorry for the wrong things I have done, and for the good I have left undone. Please forgive me. Help me to put my faith in you, Lord. I want that new life in Jesus Christ. I want to know you as my Savior, my Lord, and my friend.”

May you be filled with the joy of experiencing for yourself How Great is God’s Faithfulness.

Amen.

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i Luke 19:1-10
ii Matthew 9:9
iii John 9
iv John 4
v Galatians 5:22-23
vi Matthew 6:25-33