

The Rev. Seth Dietrich
October 8, 2023 - Proper 22 (Stewardship Sunday)

God's Faithfulness from Age to Age

In the name of God: Father Son and Holy Spirit, the one Lord and Mother of us All. Amen.

A friend of mine is restoring a big, thick Bible which has been passed down through generations in his family. He found someone in Chicago who can rebuild the spine, re-work the leather stitching, mend the torn pages. It will cost a lot, but it's worth it to my friend. The book is a tactile reminder of the faith which has sustained his family.

I wonder: do you have a sacred object that has been passed down in *your* family or maybe something given by a mentor or friend? Over the years people have pulled me aside to show off all kinds of things. "Here is the silver-plated crucifix my grandmother wore every day. It probably cost \$.89 in 1923. But it is utterly priceless to me now." Or "Here is my uncle's bronze chip for one year of sobriety. He carried it in his pocket every day, and now I do, too."

I'm fortunate to have an object from my father. My dad was incredibly complicated: he was on the spectrum, he had bipolar. He had a PHD in theoretical mathematics from Northwestern and in 1971 he had what he thought was an easy career path all laid out. But then suddenly he was told that not be given tenure. It was such a blow: the rejection, the sudden, stripping of all that status, all that identity, all his best laid plans. A few months later, he had what was then called "a nervous breakdown" and he spent 3 weeks in a psychiatric hospital. But then slowly he began to rebuild. He ended up having a highly successful next chapter after teaching himself architecture and construction. But more than economically rebuilding, that shattering of his own agenda pushed him into a spiritual search.

He read and he read some more. Twenty years later, standing in a room lined with books, I asked him which of all these books means the most to you. He pulled down this ragged paperback, a cheap reprint of a book by the 19th century psychologist, William James titled: *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James was deeply interested in individual spiritual experience, asserting that doctrines and dogmas have their place, but for many, an *experience* of the divine was primary. And this resonated so deeply with my dad. Because when he'd been in that hospital, broken, terrified, he'd had this vision of the Living Christ in the room with him. Just standing there. A peaceful, warm presence for a few moments and then gone. My dad grew up in a rational, secular humanist household. He didn't believe a word of Christianity. But it was real to him. James gave my dad permission for such an experience.

When I hold that book, underlined and annotated in handwriting I mostly cannot read, I remember my dad. When I touch that book, I also think of my own struggles, my own crises, my

own times of being shattered and terrified, and also my own experiences of a divine peace deeper than rational understanding.

I almost never preach on the psalm, but this Psalm 100 is so beloved across both Jewish and Christian traditions. Psalm 100 is also a foundational psalm for Anglicanism because it is featured in Daily Morning Prayer in the Book of Common Prayer. Like many psalms it was written to be sung in the Temple. Its Latin title, *The Jubilate*, comes from the first line: “Be joyful in the Lord all you lands.” The psalm continues with encouragement for action, as if joy is less a sweet feeling to be sought, and is more a by-product of how we live. The psalmist prods us to act: Give thanks to God. Serve God. Come before God’s presence with a song.”

Why should we find such joy in God? First, we belong to him. To her. We are God’s people and the sheep of God’s pasture. And second, if God has claimed you as his own, this claim can never be broken, no matter what happens and no matter how much time passes. We read in that last line: “His mercy is everlasting and his faithfulness endures from age to age.” Some translations say “endures for all generations.” It is a song of praise; a song of deep trust.

Ancient Israel could trace God’s faithfulness through their history. Time and again, they cried out for deliverance, not unlike so many are doing this morning. We pray for peace in the Holy Lands. Time and time again the Lord would hear their cries, bind up their wounds, heal and restore them.

And we can trace God’s faithfulness in the Church. Not just the Church universal, but we can trace God’s faithfulness in the particulars of one local parish. In 1931, 2 years after the biggest economic crash our nation has ever seen, 9 families met not far from here to begin a new church. Eventually those families and a few others scraped the money together to hire Fr. Marshall Mallory Day, a professor of Hebrew and Old Testament at Nashotah House Theological seminary. The stories go that he was exceptionally bright, faithful, warm; that he had much of Gilbert and Sullivan’s catalog memorized, and that he had absolutely no skills for administration. But that didn’t matter. People came and they kept coming.

This church was built and dedicated 10 years later, in 1941. And still they came, especially kids, born in droves after the war. So they built Sunday school rooms, then a fellowship hall, an office wing. And they expanded the nave towards lake drive by another third in 1956. The milestones kept coming, there are many we could mention. In 1976, the first woman ordained in the Episcopal church in WI, was a long-time lay-leader in this parish. In the 1980’s men from this parish invested in a tutoring ministry in the city called Our Next Generation. Thirty years later, as soon as the bishop allowed it, this church voted overwhelmingly to allow the priests to bless the union of same gender couples. We could go on.

Do you know how you can tell the church was expanded? You can't see it in the roof line. You can't see it in the floors or the walls. You can see it in the pews. If you look carefully, a third of the pews have a rounded top edge and $\frac{2}{3}$ have a straight top edge. When they expanded they mixed them up to make it less obvious. These hard oak pews are a tactile artifact of faith passed down through the generations, a sacred object that you do not hold but one which holds you. Think about the prayers offered in these very pews over the last 80 years. All the events in the world; all the events in people's lives. Prayers of the most profound thanksgiving. Prayers seeking grace and mercy by people stripped and broken.

Today we begin a brief stewardship season in which all of us sitting in these pews ask ourselves, "How will I respond to God's abundant faithfulness?"

We do stewardship a little differently here. We don't publish a budget. We don't push for a hard dollar number. Here we ask you to think less about this institution and more about your own life, the abundance you have been given. Everything we have is a gift. Every talent, every ounce of will, every breath which fills our lungs, all of it is a gift from God. And we have incredible agency in how we manage or steward this abundance. The practice of God's people for thousands of years is to give a portion of this abundance, in gratitude, back to God through the church. Back when Psalm 100 was written, the practice was to tithe or to give 10% of the crops, 10% of the livestock to the Temple. In the Episcopal Church the tithe is still the standard. That is a lot. A few in this parish are there. Most of us are on the way. Thank you in advance for prayerfully considering a pledge next year.

In charting the milestones along the timeline of this parish, there have been many times of great rejoicing. But of course, there have also been great tragedies. One year before this church was expanded, Fr. Day was crossing Silver Spring when he was hit by car. The accident left him in critical condition; he was barely clinging to life. People came into these hard, oak pews and to pray for him: some prayed for a miracle, some prayed for an easy death, some prayed for his wife Peggy and their children. He died several days later, on the eve of All Saints Day, 1955.

Those who visited Fr. Day in those intervening days when he was barely conscious, heard him speaking in Hebrew. As they listened, they realized he was reciting snatches of psalms. We don't have a record of which psalms or verses. But given how often he would have said *the Jubilate* as a part of daily Morning Prayer, it is easy to imagine him offering in his final breaths this song of praise, this song of trust. *Be joyful in the Lord all you lands serve the Lord with gladness. For his mercy is everlasting; and his faithfulness endures from age to age.*

How will we respond to God's abundant, enduring faithfulness?