

Faithfulness – God’s and Ours
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Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio
The Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time
November 15, 2009

1 Samuel 1:9-11; Hebrews 10:19-25; Mark 13:1-8

Text: “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.” -- Hebrews 10:23

This is the time of year when I often become Mr. Grumpy. Not Mr. Scrooge, going around bah-humbugging Christmas simply because it’s Christmas, but because I don’t like the feeling of being pushed into the holidays by decorations going up before Halloween. I’m not exaggerating. I was driving through the town center of a village not far from here the Monday before Halloween, and a crew was out affixing decorations to the lamp poles, and I found myself crankily saying to them – safely inside my car, of course, where they couldn’t hear me – “Good grief! Can’t you wait until at least Thanksgiving to put those up! Can’t we celebrate just one holiday at a time?”

And I grumpily mutter some version of that complaint to myself all through these weeks of mid-and late autumn, and I’m not convinced yet that I’m entirely wrong to be out of sorts for wanting Christmas not to be rushed. Can’t we appreciate each holiday as it comes, in its own right, and with its own integrity and respect? Are we so desperate for the holiday spending orgy at the end of the year that we feel we have to push it earlier and earlier in people’s faces?

And thus it goes, and I know I’m not alone. But the other day, as I was taking my walk, I came upon one of my neighbors who was stringing Christmas lights along the front of his house. It was one of those gorgeous Indian summer days in November when the temperature had reached the mid-60s, and the weather and my neighbor’s activities seemed quite incongruous to me. I was wearing shorts and a tee-shirt, in fact, it was so warm, so I really wasn’t much in the mood for blue icicles.

But when I spoke to my neighbor and said something innocuous like “Beautiful day, isn’t it?” he replied, “Yes, it is, and I’m taking advantage of it even though I don’t like putting the lights up this early. But last year I came in with my hands chapped and bleeding after I put up the lights on a really cold day, and I didn’t want to do that again.”

I realize now that God, through my neighbor, brought me to a moment of grace in that encounter. In the days that followed that conversation, as I passed other houses with Christmas lights up well before Thanksgiving, I now realize that all of those folks aren't necessarily rushing the season; they may simply be trying to take advantage of the glorious weather we've had recently and not wind up with chapped and bleeding hands after putting the lights up in harsh weather. My attitude has shifted completely since the conversation with my neighbor, and just a little bit of the harsh judgmentalism that has plagued me all my life has been tempered. God has been faithful to me again.

This morning's text is about the faithfulness of God, and it's taken from the book of Hebrews: "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful." That's Hebrews 10:23, and it's one of the many verses in Scripture that speak of God's faithfulness, which is an idea that many of us don't spend much time with. We often speak in church of our faithfulness – usually in the negative, because we all feel we're not faithful enough – but God's faithfulness is something we take largely for granted. If the sun comes up, God's been faithful. If the rains come at the appropriate time and in the appropriate amount, God's been faithful. If a loved one returns from a tour of military duty, God's been faithful.

God's faithfulness in most of our minds is tied very closely to our desires and hopes and aspirations. God is faithful when we get what we want, when life is going swimmingly, when we whistle as we work.

But the author of Hebrews reminds us that God's faithfulness is actually about something very different. God's faithfulness isn't really about giving us what we want or making us happy. God's faithfulness to us has been demonstrated to us in our creation, our redemption, and our ultimate reunion with God in God's realm of eternal life.

And even more importantly than these demonstrations of God's faithfulness is God's faithful love for us shown again and again in what it means to be fully human. While we wait for the process of our redemption to be fully realized in the beyond-time called heaven or God's realm, we have not been abandoned to our own devices and desires, as the Prayerbook puts it. We have not been thrown to the sharks of this world, who are ready to rip and tear to pieces anyone unfortunate enough to be weaker than they and to fall into their tank. The world has not, as the deists, thought, been set in motion by a disinterested watch-maker God, to tick along as it will, with no consideration to right or wrong.

We Christians don't believe that. We believe that God has shown us, time and time again, what it means to live as the Fully Human One, which is what Jesus called himself in that creaky patriarchal phrase "Son of Man." We believe that God comes to us, over and over again, with opportunities for us to get it right. We are a people who believe that God is still speaking,

which is our way of saying what the writer of Hebrews says in our text, "For [the one] who has promised is faithful."

So the next time you're ready to join me in a rousing chorus of "Can't you wait until after Thanksgiving to put those up?" remember that there may be perfectly good reasons for folks to be stringing up the Christmas lights that have nothing to do with rushing the season. Let God speak to you through a neighbor, through a friend, through the autumn splendor, perhaps even through something as pedestrian as the minister's sermon. Let God speak and let yourself become aware again of that never-failing faithfulness that is waiting for us to respond in kind. Let God's faithfulness be the pattern for yours.

"Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful." Thanks be to God.