

“Being Faithful in Faithless Situations”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Father's Day, Sunday, June 16, 2013

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: 1 Kings 21:1-10, 15-21a

21:1 Later the following events took place: Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of King Ahab of Samaria.

2 And Ahab said to Naboth, "Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house; I will give you a better vineyard for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money.

3 But Naboth said to Ahab, "The LORD forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance."

4 Ahab went home resentful and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him; for he had said, "I will not give you my ancestral inheritance." He lay down on his bed, turned away his face, and would not eat.

5 His wife Jezebel came to him and said, "Why are you so depressed that you will not eat?"

6 He said to her, "Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite and said to him, 'Give me your vineyard for money; or else, if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard for it'; but he answered, 'I will not give you my vineyard.'"

7 His wife Jezebel said to him, "Do you now govern Israel? Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite."

8 So she wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal; she sent the letters to the elders and the nobles who lived with Naboth in his city.

9 She wrote in the letters, "Proclaim a fast, and seat Naboth at the head of the assembly;

10 seat two scoundrels opposite him, and have them bring a charge against him, saying, 'You have cursed God and the king.' Then take him out, and stone him to death."

15 As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, "Go, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead."

16 As soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab set out to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.

17 Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying:

18 Go down to meet King Ahab of Israel, who rules in Samaria; he is now in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession.

19 You shall say to him, "Thus says the LORD: Have you killed, and also taken possession?" You shall say to him, "Thus says the LORD: In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood."

20 Ahab said to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy?" He answered, "I have found you. Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the LORD, 21 I will bring disaster on you.

Keep the Faith, Even and Especially in Faithless Situations

In First Kings we read that

King Ahab of Samaria was wealthy and powerful beyond belief.

King Ahab of Samaria already had all that he could use and more than he needed,

yet he chose to use his power and influence

to take the good name,

then the good life,

and then the good land of a neighboring farmer

named Naboth the Jezreelite.

Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel,

beside the palace of King Ahab of Samaria.

And Ahab said to Naboth,

"Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden,

because it is near my house;

I will give you a better vineyard for it;

or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money.”

But Naboth said to Ahab,

“The LORD forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance.”

Naboth stands firm and true to the Lord,

faithful to God and to his people,

faithful in a faithless situation,

faithful over and against a mighty and corrupt King,

faithful when he could have capitulated

to what the Apostle Paul would label

“the principalities and the powers.”

Enter the Prophet Elijah.

Enter a man of faith called by God to stand up to King Ahab yet again.

Enter a soul filled with faith to speak the truth in love in a faithless situation.

Remember how God said to Moses,

“Go down to Egypt, and tell the Pharaoh to let my people go”?

Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying:

Go down to meet King Ahab of Israel, who rules in Samaria;

he is now in the vineyard of Naboth,

where he has gone to take possession.

You shall say to him,

“Thus says the LORD: Have you killed, and also taken possession?”

The Word of God promised that just as Naboth was murdered,
so too would Ahab come to a brutal and painful end.

Ahab said to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy?"

[Elijah] answered, "I have found you. Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the LORD, I will bring disaster on you."

What strikes us about this passage from the Holy Bible

is the true grit of Naboth the Jezreelite

who stands up for his right and his heritage;

the abject greed and cruelty of Ahab

who lacks an ethical sense of enough or boundaries or behavior;

and the tenacity and courage of Elijah to stand up for not only his faith

but also for Naboth's faith and that of his faith community,

even if it means risking a similar fate.

My friends, faith in a God of love and grace, mercy and justice

will give you the grit, the ethics, and the courage

to be God's bearer of the faith

in whatever room and home you find yourself,

even and especially in faithless situations.

Faith is born of an experience of the holy,

a gift of God planted within us

that enlightens and informs, engages and empowers.

The Christian faith has no grandchildren.

Faith in Jesus Christ is not a spiritual inheritance

nor is it a part of our genetic DNA.

Every soul, every person must discover and discern faith for him or herself.

Soren Kierkegaard said,

“In matters of faith every generation has to begin again.”

Yes, we can learn about the faith,

and yes, we can hear stories and tales, poems and songs

that speak of the joy and power of faith.

Ultimately faith is lived.

Speaking personally, I learned about how to believe in Jesus

before I believed in Him.

I learned the stories and songs and spirituality of God

before I met God face-to-face

through the gracious acts of forgiveness and love of God’s people.

Afterward I realized that God had been present all the time

with me, with you, with us.

You see, it was the faith of my friends and family that saved me,

that brought out from within me the gift of faith.

Having said that to remind us all of our own responsibility and calling,

followers of Jesus are often influenced

by the faithful who have shown us the way.

We stand on the shoulders of people of faith

who have sacrificed and served and shared

so that we might have this faith, and have it abundantly.

Our faith community has been transformed and enlightened

by those who have gone before us. We remember and celebrate their gifts.

LA Cunningham was born and raised in Okonee County, Georgia,

one of five brothers, three of whom went into the Christian ministry.

While his brothers speak of Christian love

with beautiful words and flowing sermons,

they will be the first to say

that LA was the one who ministered through his actions.

He was faithful in trying times and challenging situations.

During World War II, First Christian Church of Decatur responded

to the needs of the community and country

in a variety of significant ways.

One ministry was to the lonely soldiers stationed in Atlanta,

young men who were far from home,

young men who were injured in battle
and recovering in the local VA Hospital.

The late Veda Stegall and Charles and Ruth Joiner

helped coordinate parties and Christian socials for the
soldiers.

Several church members would go to the USO

and bring back young men for hot dogs, salads, and cakes;

our church did this with the hope

that somewhere else someone else

was doing the same thing for our
own young men.

Each Sunday at 2 p.m. a bus left from in front of the Decatur
courthouse.

Our church women would take the bus to the VA Hospital

to talk with injured young men.

LA went with them,

only to discover that the guys didn't want to talk with him;

they wanted to talk with the women!

LA wasn't overseas at the time because when he was 22, he lost
most of one leg.

While LA was in the hospital recovering from his own surgery,
his brother Bill drove down to see him in a new car.

LA snuck out of his room but as he left the building,
he and Bill saw the doctor coming around the corner.

LA hustled back to his room as fast as he could.

The doctor caught him, though,
and asked him what in the world he had been up to.

LA said, "Oh, I just wanted to see if I could drive Bill's new car."

He was fitted with a prosthesis.

He never complained

He never looked back.

He stayed faithful in a situation that might have led many to lose theirs.

Meanwhile, back at the VA Hospital in Decatur,

a colonel saw LA standing around

while the women visited with the soldiers.

The colonel said, "May I help you?"

LA explained the situation, confiding that he had one leg,

and the colonel said, "I know where you ought to be."

He took him out and into a hospital ward where the boys had just come in;

each young man there had lost a limb.

LA walked up and down the ward, showing them how he could move.

They asked him to show his leg, so LA did a striptease down to his skivvies.

They asked him all sorts of questions. “Do you ever have to change shoes?

Can you swim? Do you swim with the leg on or off?”

One guy did not speak.

He was busily writing a letter, trying hard not to pay attention.

His letter was to his fiancé, and he had written:

“Now that I have lost a limb, we cannot get married.”

LA realized that the young men were too timid

to ask what was really on their minds.

He received permission from the colonel

and brought in his beautiful wife, Elizabeth,

and Gus, their 18-month-old son.

After that day the Cunningham family went almost every Sunday,

with LA's striptease becoming an eye opening experience on the ward.

The Cunningham family met a soldier

who could not cope with his loss of a foot.
They also met a soldier who had the best outlook on life of anyone,
and he was missing both legs, one arm,
and he had shrapnel across his back.
He was always joking and smiling,
making everyone else laugh with him
as he maneuvered his wheelchair with one hand.
His personal mission was to help his company laugh
and move forward.

Paul Tillich wrote,

*“We want only to show you something
we have seen
and to tell you something we have heard...
that here and there in the world
and now and then in ourselves
is a New Creation.”* (Paul Tillich,
The New Being)

A witness for Christ is one who shows what she has seen;

a witness for Christ is one who tells what he has heard.

A witness for Christ shares with joy and sincerity

*“...that here and there in the world
and now and then in ourselves is a New Creation.”*

Someone once intimated that she could not be a keeper of the faith
in Christ,

that she could not be a New Creation
because she was no saint.

She did not have the confidence

that she could be faithful in faithless situations.

A saint is more than an image made of stained glass.

A saint is more than an unrealistic, false image of human
perfection.

A saint is one who has been to the depths of tragedy,

one who has experienced the real, devastating pain of loss,

one who emerges from the ashes like the Phoenix,

a new Creation in Christ,

offering to God and the community
grace.

The saints in our midst and those who have gone on before us

enlighten and empower our own journeys with their grace.

Our own fledgling faith is stronger and deeper and wider
thanks to the Naboths, Elijahs, and LA Cunninghams
who loved and lived, persevered and prayed
in the toughest of times.

LA was a remarkable witness for Christ
through his deeds of mercy and comfort.

He lived as best as he could, as best as he knew how,
as best as his body and mind and faith would permit,
which is all any one of God's children can ask for.

At age 22, LA had to begin to cope with the shock and grief
that accompanies the loss of a limb.

He was able to help many, many young men and women
cope with their own shock and grief over lost limbs.

His faith, like your own faith,
witnessed to the glory of God to bring into life a New
Creation.

Luckily, for most of us, at least,
we are not asked or called to strip to our skivvies
in order to share our faith or coping skills.

Phew.

We are asked to share our stories, our resources, our energy

and our commitment to Christ and His Church.

LA is not with us anymore;

his physical presence is gone

yet his spirit remains to enlighten and encourage.

The Good News is that LA Cunningham is not lost, for we know where he is.

The Good News is that you are not lost,

for you are home,

found and complete and loved

and in the arms of God and God's faith
community.

The faith of a Living God is planted deep within you.

You have within you all you need to be faithful.

Together, thanks to the grace of God, we can face any situation.

We have nothing to fear,

nothing to lose,

and nothing to worry about.

My goodness, who could stand against a faithful people

whom God commands to go forth and serve?

Go down to King Ahab and cry out for Naboth the Jezreelite!

Go down to the principalities and powers and cry out for justice!

Go down to the VA and welcome home the wounded warriors!

Go downtown and reach out to the lost and the least!

Go down to church camp

and minister to the children and young people who hunger
for love!

Go down the street and reach out to your neighbor,

and share the faith that has

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

EXTRA MATERIAL

A missionary travelled to a far off land to serve God's people there. Upon arrival he learned the local dialects, and began to translate the Bible into their language. He got stuck on the word faith. He could not find an equivalent in their dialect. In need of help, he approached a local shaman. The shaman listened to the missionary and studied the translated Bible, and finally said, "Does faith not mean to hear with the heart?"

"I believe in order that I may understand." – Saint Augustine

Christian faith operates in the realm of meaning, rather than the realm of facts and figures. Faith recognizes facts, and is grounded in the reality in which we live and breathe. The purpose of faith is not to prove or contradict facts. The purpose of faith is to enhance and deepen understanding.