

***Stewardship Sermon Series: Why I Love My Church?***  
***Sermon Title: “Our Spirit of Faithfulness”***  
***Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Psalm 66:1-12; Luke 17:11-19; 2 Timothy 2:8-15***  
***Salem United Methodist Church; October 9, 2016***  
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There are many reasons that we love our church. Each week during our Stewardship Campaign we are focusing on one aspect of why we may love Salem UMC. In the past few weeks, we talked about our hope in Christ, our commitment to mission, and our spirit of generosity. Today we will talk about Salem’s spirit of faithfulness.

A home health care provider was on her way to see a patient at home when her car stopped running. She pulled over and realized that her gas tank was empty. She walked to the nearest gas station for gas. The attendant told her that someone had just borrowed their last gas can, but she could wait until it was returned. She waited for some time. When the gas can wasn’t returned, she decided to return her car to see if she had a container that would hold gasoline. She remembered the bed pan she was taking it to her in-home patient. So she walked back to the gas station, put some gasoline in the bed pan, went back to her car, and poured it into her tank. A man who was walking his dog sees her pouring the contents of the bedpan into her gas tank and shouts to her, “That takes a lot of faith!”

Obviously, this was a total misunderstanding. No faith was involved at all, just a little ingenuity. Faith is about having trust in the reliability of something or someone. In this misunderstood situation, the man thought that the woman was trusting in the reliability that urine could act like gasoline! Having faith in God is to trust in God’s reliability. Our Psalter today praises God for remaining faithful to humanity. The Psalm describes God’s faithfulness as awesome. Even when we have been tested and tried, God is still faithful and brings us through. Giving God praise is one way in which we can honor God’s faithfulness to us. Our God is an awesome God!

Another way we can honor God is by living a life of faithfulness. The prophet Jeremiah understood the importance of this when he wrote a letter to the Jewish exiles in Babylon. We could title his letter, “How to Make Lemonade Out of Lemons.” After years and years of Jeremiah warning the people to be faithful to God and after years and years of them not heeding, they find themselves being taken as prisoners of war to Babylon or exiled from their homes in Jerusalem. So what does Jeremiah do? Does he tell them, “I told you so?” Does God have Jeremiah say, “Because you have been so unfaithful to me, you deserve to have lost your homes and families. You deserve to be exiled! You deserve this!” No, instead Jeremiah nurtures their faith by writing them a letter of encouragement. He tells them that in the midst of their grief and sorrow, God has not abandoned them. God is the One who has carried them into exile. Even in their midst of their unfaithfulness to God, God is still being faithful to them. So Jeremiah advised them to accept what has happened. Settle in. Build homes. Start families, and establish relationships with the Babylonians, their captors. They were to create a new life. Jeremiah could have stopped there, but he doesn’t. He attempts one more time to pull them back into relationship with God. So what does Jeremiah tell them to do? He tells them to pray. Why? Their future depends on it! Do they listen this time? Yes, they do. The time of the exile is a turning point for the Jews. The exile becomes a type of “time out” to contemplate on their past behavior. They reflected on their relationship with God and did a lot of praying. Great faithfulness grew out of the exile. Scholars tell us that during the exile most of the Hebrew Scriptures were written down. Up to this point the scriptures were in an oral tradition. As the exiled Jews searched their hearts, God remained faithful and blessed them. Eventually the exiles were sent back to Jerusalem where they rebuilt the city and began their new lives of faith. Our God is an awesome God!

Our Gospel lesson is another story about faith, but it also a story about rejection and acceptance. The story begins in a region between two countries, Samaria and Galilee. This “region between” was a

“no man’s land.” The rejects of society, such as the people with leprosy, went there to live. Medical science didn’t exist during this time, but people knew that leprosy was contagious. So people who contracted leprosy were exiled from their communities. They lived together in this “no man’s land” where they suffered and supported each other as best as they could. Then Jesus comes to them. They ask for mercy from the physical pain and from the pain of rejection by their communities. Jesus, who was faithful to the Jewish traditions, tells them to visit the priests. As they are on their way, they are healed. Not only did they experience this physical healing, but they now could reclaim their identity and their humanity. Because Jesus was faithful and showed mercy on them, these exiled lepers could go home, back to their families, their villages and their faith communities. They can once again worship God with their neighbors. Our God is an awesome God!

One man, however, was not Jewish. He was Samaritan. He knew that if he went to the Jewish priest, the priest would reject him because he was Samaritan. There was no love lost between the Jews and the Samaritans. They disagreed on how to worship God, where God could be worshipped, and on how the scriptures were to be interpreted. The Samaritans believed that they were right and that the Jews were wrong. And the Jews believed that they were right and that the Samaritans were wrong. Prejudice and hate thrived. The healed Samaritan man realized that none of this mattered to Jesus. Jesus healed all the lepers no matter who they were, what they believed, or how they worshipped God. Jesus had exhibited God’s faithfulness to all. So the healed Samaritan exhibited his faithfulness to God by returning to Jesus, praising God and thanking Jesus. Our God is an awesome God and Jesus is the face of God’s awesomeness!

I have witnessed God’s awesome faithfulness here at Salem. I have been pastoring here for eight years. Like Psalmist wrote, “We have gone through fire and through water,” figuratively speaking. During this time many have been called home to their eternal life with Jesus. In addition, we lost one staff person. Yes, we have been tested and tried, yet through it all God has remained faithful to us. In the midst of our grief and loss, God has not abandoned us. Through it all, we can still praise God for God’s great faithfulness. Through it all, we can still lead lives of faithfulness both in our church and in our communities. God hasn’t given up on us. We still have hope in Christ. We still have the Spirit of mission and generosity. We still remain faithful with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness. We continue to grow in our Christian faith together and we continue to express our love to everyone both inside these walls and outside them. We reject no one. We strive to be a signpost of God’s grace to those in our community by offering hope with the spirit of mission and generosity. God continues to be faithful to us and we continue to trust in God’s reliability. We continue to strive to be open to God’s will. We continue to strive to put our whole faith and trust in Christ. We continue to rely on God, knowing that God relies on us, too. God is not finished with us yet, so we live by faith. Our God is an awesome God!

Yet, there are people today who are struggling with their faith. Their hearts are filled with anger, hopelessness, restlessness, and hate. Did you know that the word, Salem, comes from the Hebrew word, “shalom?” It means a sense of peace, a sense of not being fragmented, but being made whole. Having faith in something greater than ourselves, having faith in the Creator of the Universe, having faith in Jesus who came to show us how through forgiveness for the pain we inflict on each other, we can become whole. We can experience shalom. We can experience Salem.

How do we offer shalom to those who are questioning God’s faithfulness? How do we offer shalom to those who feel rejected and are searching for acceptance? How do we offer shalom to those who are being tried and tested? How do we offer shalom to those who are living in any type of exile?

With God’s love. There is Bible verse that has brought me through times of trial and testing and offered me shalom. “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercy never comes to an end. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness, O Lord” (Lamentations 3: 23). Yes, our God is an awesome God!

