

## Unchained Word

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner  
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

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*28<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C*

2 Timothy 2:8-15



“God is faithful.” This is how Mike always greeted everyone.

“How’s the day going, Mike?”

“God is faithful.”

“How are things with your family, Mike?”

“God is faithful.”

“Heard about your mom being sick, Mike. I’m so sorry.”

“God is faithful.”

Truth be told, it got kind of annoying. It felt at times like Mike was a one-trick pony, that perhaps he didn’t go any deeper than “God is faithful,” that perhaps he said it as a way of avoiding real conversation, as a kind of armor to hide vulnerability. Apparently I wasn’t the only person walking the halls of the divinity school to have this issue.

In a pastoral care class I was taking along with Mike, someone in the class confronted him. I forget what he said, but it was probably some variation on “God is faithful,” and another student chimed in. “You know, I hope you don’t go around saying that when you visit people in the hospital, or people in crisis. You can’t paper over pain with platitudes.” The stinging criticism has stayed in my memory because of the phrasing (and alliteration) of that last line – “paper over pain with platitudes.”

That exchange from all those years ago came to mind when I read this text. I will admit I have always had some trouble with it. Part of my trouble is that oh-so-Presbyterian response to anything that smacks of a “quid-pro-quo God,” anything that

seems to diminish God's grace, that seems to chain what Paul himself calls an unchained word.

When the group of elders preparing to go on session comes together, we always do a little quiz entitled "To Be or Not to Be Reformed." It is designed to call attention to some of the core theological principles of Presbyterian and Reformed churches. As we are discussing it afterward, a theme emerges. Any time you read the phrase, "If you do something, then God will do something," it is not Reformed (examples). With God, there is no quid-pro-quo. God's word is unchained.

But then we read this "saying" Paul quotes, which is probably a piece of ancient liturgy from the earliest church: "If we die with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us..."

It seems at first glance that Paul is chaining up this word he just proclaimed as unchained, tying God's hands, and ours, in an "if you, then God" arrangement that is impossible to achieve.

I get the context. Paul is in prison. Timothy, as those of you here last week will remember, is troubled by Paul's imprisonment and suffering, so much so that the last time they were together, Timothy wept. And Timothy is probably not alone in these feelings. The early church was confronted with the very real possibility of persecution, imprisonment, even death, because of their faith. Paul's harsh words serve as a kind of encouragement.

And yet it still is hard to hear these words and think, "the call here is too much. Who can stand, if this is the standard?"

You can hear the anguish in Frederick Buechner as he preaches about this text:

"And now brothers, I will ask you a terrible question, and God knows I ask it of myself. Is the truth beyond all truths, beyond the stars, just this: that to live without him is the real death, that to die with him is the only life?"

It is a terrible question, because we know its truth. We experience the truth of it daily, in the many ways we deny him still. Each time we choose hatred over love, each time we return evil for evil, each time we compromise in our walk because of distraction or despair or despondency.

It is a terrible question, because we know its truth. If the path to abundant life is dying to self, taking up the cross, and following Jesus, then that path is frankly more than we can bear, more than we can do on our own. We will fail.

And we are not alone. Remember Peter, in the courtyard, Jesus inside being brutally interrogated, and Peter not once but three times denies Jesus, denies ever knowing him. Remember Jesus in the garden, deeply grieved, he said, to the point of death. And he asks his disciples to do only one thing, to stay awake, to be present with him in his suffering. And as he prays, with sweat falling like drops of blood on the ground, that God would remove this cup from him, the disciples fall asleep. Remember Jesus, hanging on the cross, crying out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and not a disciple to be found, all had abandoned him.

“If we deny him, he will deny us.”

And yet, there is that last line in the saying, “If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself.”

He cannot deny himself. Yes, look at Peter, James, John, and all the other disciples, right down to our very day. Yes, they failed. They denied. They caved in to fear. They misunderstood. And yet they were restored. They received grace. They built this church that we continue to inhabit, a church made up not of perfect disciples, but forgiven sinners. I take this little saying Paul quotes to mean that even if we go as far as Peter did, even if we travel far away from the home of God’s life, even there, even then, God will always make a way for us to come home, God’s grace will restore. God is faithful. It is only because of God’s faithfulness we have any possibility of faithfulness.

The room grew quiet after the confrontation, those words settling on the classroom, “paper over pain with platitudes.” Everyone was looking at Mike.

“In the African American church I attend, we have a saying, ‘God is good.’ The leader says, ‘God is good,’ and the people respond, ‘All the time,’ and then the leader says, ‘All the time,’ and the people say, ‘God is good.’ I grew up with that. Later on, when I was younger, I got in some trouble. Spent time in jail. And that’s all I heard, from my parents, my pastor, any relative come to see me, anyone from the church: ‘God is good,’ ‘God is good.’ All I could think every time I heard it was, ‘And you are not.’ I felt like I had disappointed my parents, my church, my God. I felt like a failure.

“In that moment, I didn’t need God to be good in general, I needed God to be good *to me*, in this jail cell. I needed to know that God would be faithful, even when I wasn’t. I

really do believe God can be as good as God wants, but if God is not faithful, then none of us can stand. I really came to believe that, so now that what's I say instead of 'God is good,' I say, 'God is faithful.' And with all due respect, it's not a platitude to me. It's the deepest truth I know. And it saved my life."

Paul said it: "Avoid wrangling over words, which does no good..." That's what we had done, and we had learned, all of us, a powerful lesson. The word that brings life is unchained, working its way into Paul's prison cell, and Mike's, and, if we will receive it, into all the ones we inhabit as well, overcoming our failure, setting us free to follow Christ without fear. The unchained word: God is faithful.

It is God's faithfulness alone which sets this table before us, and in the strength of this meal may we respond with lives of faith, in response to God's grace. God is faithful, all the time; all the time, God is faithful. Amen.