

## Swearing to Be Faithful

Text: Matthew 5:33-37

*Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on February 21, 2021*

One of the lesser-known Greek goddesses is Peitho, the goddess of persuasion. She is often depicted hanging out with Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and romantic seduction was definitely in her portfolio. But it wasn't only that. Peitho also served cities, civic groups, and other kinds of relationships where her powers of persuasion functioned as diplomacy—helping to unite conflicted factions and bringing harmony to roiling relationships. The goddess who was seen as Peitho's opposite was Bia, who personified force, anger, and raw energy.

Peitho was generally seen as helpful, but her depiction in literature sometimes has her serving as the agent of persuasion to abduction and murder. And there was always the question of whether Peitho's persuasion was really skillful manipulation. Greek literature struggled with this for some time, but according to a paper by Charles Marsh I found published in the *Journal of Public Relations Research* in 2015, the Greeks finally came to trust Peitho as, at her best, being "honest, respectful of others, and mindful of community wellbeing."

So why are we talking about Peitho? Because her name was not just a proper noun. It was also a common noun in Greek and *peitho* as a common noun is the root of one of the most commonly used words in the New Testament, *pistis*, which is most commonly translated as "faith." *Pistis* is used hundreds of times in the New Testament and one of those times is...wait for it...in the list of the Fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. The King James translates it as "faith" here, but this time the NRSV is in line with everybody except the King James in translating it as "faithfulness." That fits the word, which is versatile. It can be faith—a belief in something; but it can also be fidelity, implying a behavior that's in keeping with a person's beliefs, which is the sense you get when you translate it as "faithfulness."

When we put all that together, we understand first that faith is born out of persuasion. Like the other words on Paul's Fruit of the Spirit list, it doesn't come to us fully formed. It's a seed—an idea that needs to take root and grow. Real faith is not a fact that you read and immediately take as true; and it is certainly not something forced on you under threat. Faith in anything is the persuasive result of learning, living, and testing a view of the world to see if it holds up to real-life experience. Once we are persuaded of something, it then becomes a conviction, which then informs our actions. We become "faithful" when we arrange our lives according to that conviction. If people have to decide whether to trust what we do or what we say, we are not yet fully faithful.

Faith and faithfulness are, in a sense, one and the same thing. If we have never been persuaded into faith—if we never really sat down and examined what we have been taught about the nature of God, life, relationships, and the world around us—our faith is still just a dormant seed. We are merely counting on the faith of others who have told us something. When we're young, either in faith or in age, there's a time for that. But there comes a season when we need to examine and re-examine our beliefs, our faith, to see if we really are persuaded by them. Are they really something I want to inform my actions or did I—as the expression goes—drink the Kool-Aid?

An unexamined life can never be a truly faithful life, because we don't know or understand what we're being faithful to; and that leaves us without an anchor when the going gets rough. But if we take the time to examine our beliefs, whether about religion or politics or relationships or anything else, faithfulness will be a natural outgrowth of our developed and lived conviction that something is true and important enough to form the foundation of a life.

An example of where the lack of a real and tested faith can land us can be found in one of the most horrific stories in the entire Bible. It comes from the book of Judges. The Judges referred to in the book's title weren't the robed dispensers of justice we think of today. In the days before Israel had a king and were just a loose federation of tribes, the Israelites only really came together when there was an outside threat and they needed to be united for defense. At such times a charismatic leader would arise to lead the forces in battle before everyone went back to life as it had been before. Those charismatic battle leaders were known as judges.

There were fifteen such judges whose exploits we learn of in the book with that name, and the ninth of them was a man named Jephthah. His story is in Judges chapter 11 and the start of chapter 12. You may have heard of his father, Gilead, but Jephthah's mother was a prostitute. Because of that, Jephthah's brothers drove him out of the house so that he would not inherit anything from their father. The Bible tells us that Jephthah attracted a band of outlaws and raided with them—not a great environment for faith formation.

Fast forward to a time when the Ammonites come calling with swords and spears. Because of Jephthah's prowess as a warrior, the Israelites decide his mother's status and doesn't concern them anymore and they convince him to return and lead them against the Ammonites. Jephthah sets to work, trying first some unsuccessful diplomacy before finally leading his forces to rout the Ammonites. All of that was thought through and considered. But then, just as the battle is about to start, Jephthah decides to swear an oath to God and says, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the Lord's, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering."

That kind of a vow is offensive on the face of it, and it shows how little Jephthah understood about the God whose help he was trying to enlist. He vows a human sacrifice. No matter who came out of that door when he got home, it would have been an affront to the God of Israel and a violation of God's commands. But when Jephthah does ride home in victory over the Ammonites, the first one out the door was his daughter, his only child, playing her tambourine to celebrate her dad's victory. He was distraught, but didn't feel he could go back on his vow. He told her what he had done, gave her a few days to go grieve with her friends, and then he fulfilled his bloody oath.

The story of Jephthah is not part of the three-year lectionary cycle. You typically won't hear it in church. But trust me when I tell you that if you find yourself trying to defend the Bible in the presence of those who hate it, there are a fair number of people *outside* the church who know the story and will throw it in your face to prove how awful the Bible is and how blind you are to the deficiencies of your own religion. The thing to know is that just because Jephthah is a guy in the Bible that was one of Israel's judges doesn't for a minute mean that the Bible is condoning what he did. The Bible is not meant to give us stories only about the faithful saints and instructions about how to live a godly life. The Bible also teaches by negative example—by showing us how life can go tragically and horribly wrong. Jephthah's story is one of those. Jephthah's story also provides an example of something we often confuse with the concept of faithfulness: Taking and keeping an oath.

Jephthah was faced with a dilemma. The Bible doesn't paint him as a cold and cruel parent, despite his actions. The Bible gives us a man horrified at what he had promised, but not discerning enough to understand that keeping his vow was not automatically the most faithful thing to do. Faithful people do keep their promises; but true faithfulness produces a fruit that carefully considers the implications of any promises before they are made, which Jephthah didn't do. And since he had been kicked out of his home

and had adopted the life of an outlaw, his faith was still a dormant seed. It had never developed with the rest of him. If it had, he would have known that while fulfilling a vow is important, doing so when it violates the most fundamental principles of God's love was more important. He would have remembered that God's stayed Abraham's hand when he was about to sacrifice Isaac to say, "No. I am not a God who desires human sacrifice."

All Jephthah knew were some stories about God granting victories and he threw out a rash vow without knowing what he was doing. And then he compounded his error with a legalistic view of God, thinking that God would demand the fulfillment of a vow no matter what. Jephthah led the people of Israel to victory in battle; but his story became a stain on the history of his people, all because he had never taken the time to nurture and grow the seed of his faith. He thought faithfulness simply meant making a vow and keeping it and nothing more. If only someone had told him that the truly faithful don't need to make explicit vows or take oaths at all. Which brings us to the passage from Matthew 5:33-37 that we read earlier in the service. There's an almost identical passage in the book of James, and in both of them the action of swearing an oath is labeled as a bad thing to do.

That always used to puzzle me. Putting aside rash oaths like Jephthah's, what about the well-considered oaths that direct our public lives? What's wrong with the Hippocratic Oath that doctors take to "Do no harm" or the oaths taken by those serving in government or the military to uphold the Constitution and defend the country? And who can object to someone swearing to tell the truth, as everyone does when testifying in a court of law or a couple vowing to love and cherish each other at a wedding? The church has all kinds of vows, from those taken by those entering monastic orders to the vows we take at baptism or when joining the church. Sure, we should really think about what is required before we take such oaths. But Jesus goes as far as saying that going beyond a simple promise to an oath is something evil. Why on earth is that?

Think it through for a minute. When we take an oath and swear on a Bible or anything else of great importance, we are signaling that we really, really mean this. By golly, I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help me God. Well, excuse me, but what is that telling me about all the other times you speak? You're not generally in the habit of telling the truth but you really for sure are now because someone will charge you with perjury if you don't? By emphasizing the seriousness of a commitment with an oath, we are implying that *without* the oath we might be considerably more lax and need some kind of outside accountability or consequences for violation to keep our promises. I think the condemnation of oaths in the Bible is simply affirming what Jesus says here. If you're asked to do something, simply let your "yes" mean "yes" and your "no" mean "no." No theatrics of swearing on a stack of Bibles. Just mean what you say and say what you mean.

I don't think we need to get legalistic about these passages and refuse to be sworn in at jury duty or not have wedding vows or refuse to take an oath that ensures consequences for violation when society entrusts us with positions of power and authority. And there are times when human nature would suggest that making a public vow will help to keep some of our less-faithful instincts in check. The point Jesus is making, I think, is that faithful people are people who have been so persuaded by their beliefs that they have gained the courage of their convictions and can be counted on to live out that faith in their day-to-day lives. For the faithful, truth-telling is the rule, not the exception, and those who know such people don't need them to swear on a stack of Bibles to believe their words. They have already proven their integrity with their lives. Keeping our word and telling the truth only when we've made an oath or only within the literal bounds of a vow is not really being faithful at all.

We should also note that faith can be misplaced. It's possible to be faithful to a horrific and evil ideology. That's why faithfulness is just one of the fruit in Paul's list. Paul's faithfulness has to mix well with the kindness, generosity, and gentleness we talked about last week. The faithfulness that springs from the Holy Spirit exhibits self-control, beginning with carefully choosing the words we let loose in the world. Most of all, it is faithful to the spirit of generous, humble, and expansive love that the Bible says is the essential nature of God.

In this world you may be required to take an oath or you may decide you really could use the added accountability. Don't let this passage make you nervous about doing so. I'm still going to ask you to take vows at baptisms, confirmations, and when joining the church. But, also, don't let those things convince you that your word doesn't matter at other times. With a faithful life, others can trust our word at all times and in all circumstances, whether we are speaking to a judge, a co-worker, a friend, a family member, or the homeless person asking for money at an intersection. We are called always to mean what we say and say what we mean and to act in a way that shows forth the image of God revealed in Jesus Christ. That is faithfulness. Amen.