

Can You Live with Yourself?

Grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ...

Years ago, I remember listening to a rabbi teach about the importance of being faithful to God – even in difficult (and uncertain times) like the ones we’re experiencing today...

He went on to tell a parable (that some have heard) about a rich man who hired a poor man to build a house on a hillside (and then went away on a long journey) ...

While the man was away the carpenter said to himself, *“Since my boss is away, I can use cheap materials for the parts of the house which will not show... (and nobody will know except me).”* ...

With that, the man used inferior materials, (poor timber, cheap fixtures, less than capable workers) and he did a very sloppy job with the paint... needless to say, the house wasn’t given the full attention that it needed (in order to make it as beautiful and as strong as it could be)...

Well, after a few months, when the house was eventually finished, the rich man returned and said to the builder with great excitement, *“This house is yours, - here’s the key... this is my gift - to you.”* ...

As you can imagine - immediately the builder regretted that he had not used the best materials and had not hired the most capable workers... If only he had known - that the house that he was building - would one day - become his own... how then would he have built that house?” ...

And the rabbi said he likes to tell that story to remind his congregation, that in like manner, *“when you choose to be faithful to God – who wants to give you everything - you end up loving yourself”* ...

You know, in the Book of Jonah (which we looked at in our first reading this morning) there’s a story about another man who struggles with being faithful... and it has nothing to do with building a house – but rather the Book of Jonah is about a man who’s struggling to be faithful in doing God’s will (and who – because of his unfaithfulness – also struggles to find peace)...

Now, let me be the first to admit that the story of Jonah's struggle is a very strange story... in that Jonah loves the Lord – and yet, he finds it impossible to be faithful to what God would have him do...

And I think, at times, we can all relate to that – can't we?....

God tells us to love our neighbor – and still we find fault...

God tells us to be generous and help the stranger in need – and so often we look away or we hold back...

God tells us to pray without ceasing – and instead we find ourselves cranky and complaining...

God tells us that He will be with us to the end of the ages – and still we doubt, and we worry, and fail to believe...

And like we read in the story of Jonah – we love God – but at times we all struggle to be faithful (in doing the things He would have us do)...

You know, Hans Walter Wolff – who has written extensively on the Book of Jonah – says that Jonah's story was often passed down from generation to generation through, what's called, an 'oral tradition'... in other words, generations of Jewish people told this story to their children (and their children's children) to provoke conversation – about doing God's Will when it's difficult (and doesn't seem to make sense)...

And most of us know the story – God commands Jonah to go to Ninevah (which was the capital city of the Assyrian empire – the enemy of Israel at the time)... and while there, he's supposed to tell the people of that city to repent (so that they're not destroyed)... and Jonah doesn't want to do this because deep down he hates these people (and he would love to see them destroyed) he doesn't want to do God's Will... and so he turns his back on God and runs away... and in doing so, his whole life spirals out of control...

And to an outsider (and perhaps even to some believers) – the story seems almost ridiculous (in that Jonah ends up being tossed off of a fishing boat – he's swallowed up by a big fish – and ends up in the belly of that fish for three days and for three nights – praying for God to release him)...

But the deeper moral of the story is to make a point – and that is – that when you know God's will for your life and you refuse to do it – or justify why you don't

want to do it (you won't know the peace of the Lord)... and when you don't have peace, like it was for Jonah (and for so many others who try to run from God) - sooner or later it, too, will take you to places you don't want to go (emotionally, mentally, and spiritually)... and the Bible calls that place 'Hell'...

And friends, listen, I'm not here to tell you how to live your lives – and if living with the peace of the Lord is of no interest to you (let me not waste your time)... by all means – follow a different path...

But it's always my hope that on Sunday mornings when we've all come together (that there's at least one kindred spirit in this place - or one who worships with us online) who, like me, wants to hold onto the peace of the Lord (even when it's hard to find – like it is today)... and if that is you – let me share with you some encouragement from God's Word....

In Revelation 2:10 we read, *“Do not fear any of those things which you are going through right now... indeed, the Devil wants to put some of you in his prison – that your faith may be tested... but be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”*

In James 1:12 it says, *“Blessed are those who remain faithful under trials, because when the time of their deliverance arrives, they will receive as their reward the life which God has promised to those who love him”...*

And of course, the words Jesus spoke in John 14:1, *“Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me”...* and we know that Jesus promised to be with us ‘until the end of the ages’...

You know, sometimes I think people are led to believe that when they're faithful to God everything in life has to be perfect (and that there's not going to be any troubles or worries or pandemics)... And I think that's why people turn away from God – because they think to themselves that faith isn't working (or that God isn't doing His part)...

but let me share something with you that I once heard at a funeral (that a young man was using to describe what it looked like to have peace even in the most difficult times of our lives)...

He told the story about a king who had built a beautiful new palace – and in the entrance of the palace he wanted to hang a painting that symbolized what peace

looked like... and so, the king announced that he would reward any man or woman who could paint a picture of what peace looked like...

Well, over the next few months, hundreds of paintings arrived at the palace... but the king decided to keep only two – which he would hang for all to see – just before announcing the winner...

And on the day of the unveiling he first showed an image of a majestic lake, so tranquil and still that the lush hills behind it were perfectly mirrored in its reflection... The sky was a brilliant blue with soft, puffy clouds floating above... Wildflowers bursting with color outlined the lake, and a family of deer calmly grazed in a far meadow... All who saw it felt peace and happiness... clearly this deserved to be the winner...

but then he unveiled the second painting – which had an image of a tall, mountainous cliff that was rugged and jagged... A foamy waterfall angrily crashed down the cliff and into the rocky land below... And overhead there were dark ominous clouds looming, and lightning flashing in the distance...

And what seemed almost out of place was a small bush that sat just behind the waterfall... and as you looked even closer at the image it was easy to see that a small mother bird had built her nest into its branches (and was sitting with her little chicks) comfortably and securely...

Well, to keep a long story short – the king decided that the second painting deserved to win...

Wondering how that painting depicted peace – the king explained, “You see, peace is not the absence of conflict... and having peace does not mean that we must run away from noise, or trouble, or dark clouds... but peace is found when you continue doing what you’re supposed to be doing – knowing that you’re exactly where you’re meant to be”...

And friends, I want to remind everyone here this morning (or who’s listening online) – that you, too, are exactly where you’re supposed to be – (and I say that because you’re in the arms of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ)... and to have the promises of Christ in your heart – is to have peace within (even in difficult days like the ones we are encountering today)...

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May the love of God reinvigorate your soul... may the desire of your heart be ever thirsting for His peace and serenity... and May the joy of salvation be given as a gift to all of us...

In Jesus name we pray!

Amen!