



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: August 23, 2009

The Gift of Being Faithful, Robert B. Culp

Hebrews 11, Selections

This morning I wish to speak with you about faithfulness, and want to begin by sharing a lovely story written by the Quaker writer/pastor Philip Gulley. He writes:

“Every time we visit my mother-in-law, Ruby, we take a drive through the country. One Saturday morning we drove down Marango Road. ‘There’s Dottie’s Beauty Salon,’ Ruby pointed out. Dottie’s Beauty Salon is owned by Dottie, who married Oscar Barton when he got back from the war in ’45. Oscar went to work at the chair factory in Paoli, and Dottie went to the beautician’s college in Louisville and got a license to cut hair.

She set up shop in her basement. Three hair dryers along one wall, a chair in the middle where Dottie works her magic, and another row of chairs where the ladies wait their turn. A few Good Housekeeping magazines, a coffee pot in the corner with a help-yourself sign, and a little piece of cardboard on the wall that reads Haircuts – \$3.00, which is what she charges to this day. Three dollars. Dottie doesn’t want to price herself out of business, so she makes her living down in the basement three dollars at a time.

Oscar worked in town at the chair factory on a lathe, turning chair legs. He’d come home at night with sawdust in his ears, sit in his easy chair, and smoke his pipe. He and Dottie would talk about their day and watch Jeopardy! One night Oscar started coughing, and a couple of nights later Dottie said, ‘Honey, you’d better have that looked at.’

So Oscar went to the doctor who ran some tests and told him it was cancer. Too much sawdust and pipe tobacco. The doctor gave him six months. Oscar took leave from the chair factory and sat home in his easy chair, watching TV. Dottie would run up from the basement between haircuts to check on him or fluff his pillow or change the channel.

One day when she had two customers under hair dryers, one in the chair, and three waiting in the bull pen, Dottie ran upstairs and found Oscar dead. She sat beside him for a while, patting his hand and remembering back to 1945. Then she rose to her feet and went back downstairs. The women asked, ‘How’s Oscar.’ Dottie said, ‘He’s gone.’ They gathered around her, consoling her. ‘Maybe you should call the sheriff,’ they told her. ‘No, not yet. I need to finish cutting your hair.’

They thought to themselves, ‘Well, we’re going to a funeral. We might as well look nice.’ So Dottie cut their hair. Two hours later she called the sheriff, and three days after that she was singing ‘Unclouded Day’ at the funeral home in Paoli.

People still talk about it down there, Gulley writes, about Dottie Barton and about how when life knocked her to the ground, she rose to her feet, brushed herself off, and kept right on cutting hair.”

Somehow, when I read that story, I thought about the figure of Ruth in the Bible. As you may remember, Ruth was a woman who fell in love with a foreigner. They married, but before they could have any children, he died, and left Ruth with a whole lot of obligations, not the least of which was taking care of a widowed mother-in-law whose name was Naomi. Somewhere along the way, Ruth had learned about faithfulness, about how you sometimes have to chip away at burdens and struggles until they become blessings.

So when Naomi moved back home, Ruth went along with her. She told her mother-in-law these faithful words (using the King James’ translation): “Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee;

for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God. Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried. The Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.” They moved to Judah, where Ruth remarried and became the great-grandmother of King David. Ruth “kept on keeping on” until burden became blessing.

In a very real way, that is what faithfulness does. It rises to its feet, and looks to the future, and scans the horizon ahead to the unclouded day ... and then it goes forward, not knowing what the future will bring, but trusting ... plugging along ... leaning expectantly into tomorrow ... and singing of a home far away.

That is the story of our faith, isn't it? Indeed, the overarching narrative that is ours tells of a people on the move who are given strength for the journey by a wondrous faith, which is defined as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” And in the 11th chapter of Hebrews we are given inspirational allusions to the lives of those very earthen vessels who are our ancestors in faith such as Noah and Abraham, Joseph and Moses and the prophets.

These are the ones who constitute a great cloud of witnesses, calling us to cast away all burdens and to run with perseverance the race that is set before us, and always looking to Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith to guide and steady our steps as we journey forth into the gift of each new day.

Now, perhaps this all sounds a bit onerous ... a rather burdensome process of grinding it out, keeping on keeping on, and in the end perhaps wearing us down. But my sense is that such faithfulness in our living ... such as seen in the lives of Dottie and Ruth ... is akin to a kind of divine distillation that brings us ultimately to some bedrock place, thick with luminosity and resilience ... an enduring inner ground where we become really real.

In this regard, I'm thinking of The Velveteen Rabbit, a wondrous story I used to read to my daughters and which I look forward to sharing with my grandchildren in the years ahead. In Margery Williams' story, the oldest and wisest resident of the nursery is the Skin Horse, a stuffed animal that has been loved so long and so hard that all his hair has been rubbed off. The Velveteen Rabbit, a new arrival, recognizes that the Skin Horse is happy, content, and secure in a way that the other toys are not. He decides that he wants to be content, too, and he becomes intensely curious about how that might happen.

“What is real?” asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender before Nana came by to tidy the room. “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?” “Real isn't how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become Real.” “Does it hurt?” “Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don't mind being hurt.” “Does it happen all at once,” he asked, “or bit by bit?”

“It doesn't happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out, and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But those things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.”

And so it happens that over the years the Velveteen Rabbit's fur is worn off, its whiskers drop off, its tail becomes unsewn, and its nose is rubbed away. It becomes threadbare, ragged with life and the rigors of love. But ... and here is the part that made our daughters beg me to read the story again and again ... the more worn down the rabbit grows, the more Real it becomes. The rabbit becomes worn down to the Real – faithful, patient, resilient, trustful, and content with a liberating peace. And the remembered words of the Skin Horse made him smile a knowing smile: “Once you are real, you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always.”

One of the wondrous truths of our faith is the reality of our being loved by God, touched by the actuality of God's grace and acceptance, and embraced by the God in whom we live and move and have our being. We are surrounded by God, and we cannot ever run out of God. Thankfully, we are utterly beloved whatever we do, no matter how great our achievements, no matter how numerous our failures.

From Dottie and Ruth, and from the Lord Jesus whom we seek to follow along the way, we come to

know that God is to be found in the glories of the mountaintop, just as much as in the pain and peril of the pit, or the anxieties and concerns attendant to a pastoral transition within our church family. Trusting in the love of God in the midst of it all is the only thing that is needed. But trusting in the sense of exercising, training our eyes and ears and hearts to recognize that kind of surprising and wondrous love in the best and worst the world can dish out, and expecting, insisting, demanding, beating on the door of heaven like the widow demanding justice of the crooked judge: “I know you’re in there, God, so you’d better come out and show yourself!”

It is “practicing resurrection” ... to borrow the phrase of Nora Gallagher’s wonderful book.

And practicing resurrection means learning to embrace the character-building and the unsettling interruptions that confront us at every turn, knowing that deeper understanding lies around the next corner and in the next challenging situation. And that always ... always ... that understanding is rooted in the seed bed of knowing ourselves as utterly loved – perhaps worn a little around the edges, maybe with less hair and more wrinkles, but nevertheless being Real ... and blessed with a faith that buoys us up and makes us strong each new day.

Let us pray:

Wherever we go, O God, there you are – in the valley of the shadow of death, in the farthest depths of the sea, on the highest and most glorious mountain peak, and in the nadir of uncertainties. And, yet, O Gracious One, we still hear your voice intoning, “You are my beloved. In you, I am well pleased.” And we hear your assurance that you will always be near, that your love is a gift from which we can never be separated, and that your steadying hand will guide us into each and every day, in Jesus Christ. Amen.