

THE QUALITY OF LOYALTY

Pilgrim Congregational Church

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2 Timothy 2:13: "...If we are faithless, he remains faithful -
for he cannot deny himself."

There is nothing like an old ballad to sum up the human situation in a very few words. For example, there is an old English ballad called "The Twa Corbies" that pictures two carrion birds sitting in a tree and looking down at a slain knight. No one else knows where the body is except "his hawk, his hound, and lady fair." But the corbies assure one another that they have nothing to fear from that trio. For -

"His hound is to the hunting gane,
His hawk to fetch the wild-fowl hame,
His lady's ta'en another mate,
So we may make our dinner sweet."

It is a powerful bit of cynicism respecting the quality of loyalty.

But there is another version of that ballad called "The Three Ravens." Once again these sinister birds sit in the tree looking down at the slain knight. Once again we hear of the hounds, the hawks and the lady fair, who is described metaphorically as a young doe, and referred to in the final line as a leman - the Middle English word for lover.

"Downe in yonder greene field,
There lies a knight slain under his shield.
His hounds they lie down at his feete,
So well they can their master keepe.

His haukes they flie so eagerly,
There's no fowle dare him come nie.

Down there comes a fallow doe,
As great with young as she might goe.

She lift up his bloudy hed,
And kist his wounds that were so red.

The lady carries the knight away to burial. And the ravens comment:

"God send every gentleman,
Such haukes, such hounds, and such a leman."

Thus the mood of the ballad is turned completely around. The forces of dissolution are surprised into reverence for the quality of loyalty.

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This is my theme today as I explore with you again another key element in the Christian way of life. What I have in mind is primarily loyalty to persons. As I think about this quality in human life it occurs to me that the first thing we need to observe is that loyalty is always based on some bond or covenant between persons. The bond may be formal and explicit as in the marriage ceremony or when a soldier takes an oath of allegiance. Or the bond may be simply understood or tacit as in the case of most friendships. Still the bond is there. Some sort of relationship of mutual trust

and responsibility is established. Otherwise it makes no sense to speak of loyalty.

For example, it would hardly make sense to tell an employee of General Motors that he should be loyal to Ford. It would make very little sense for me to tell you that you should behave as loyal Italians. There is a sense perhaps in which we may speak of being loyal to our fellow-human beings, even to other creatures, regardless of whether we have any personal relationship with them. There are saintly souls, - St. Francis of Assisi, and John Woolman, the Quaker, are two examples - who feel a profound sense of kinship with all God's creatures. That sense of kinship may engender a feeling of loyalty. But practically speaking, loyalty only applies where we have made some sort of personal commitment to another person or to a community of persons. The Bible's word for such a commitment is "covenant." The biblical story from beginning to end is a story about covenants and about faithfulness to covenants.

So loyalty arises when there is some kind of relationship of mutual trust, a covenant.

But how might we describe loyalty?

We might begin by saying that loyalty has to do with being there. The loyal employee is the one who is on the job, doing the job when he's supposed to be, and even at times when he is not required to be. The loyal friend is the one who stands by when you need him, who shows up when everybody else has forgotten about you.

The loyal person is steadfast, a fixed star in the lives of those who count on him. In the story of Ruth we hear of a young widow who gives up her homeland to be with her mother-in-law.

"Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you;
for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people, and your God my God."

There is a classic statement of personal loyalty in our religious heritage. It is a rather surprising one too for contemporary culture. For in the popular stories of our time there is no more unlikely alliance than that between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law.

The loyal person is there. And he is there when it is hard to be there. He is there for better, for worse. The language of the old Episcopal wedding service doesn't turn modern brides and grooms on much any more: but you can't beat it for spelling out what loyalty means in terms of the marriage covenant.

"To have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse,
for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part."

One has to be careful at this point because we do realize that there are situations where the covenant itself falls apart, and where loyalty to the other person may even dictate a separation. But I can't help but feel that one reason that so many marriages fail these days is that the for better, for worse side of loyalty has gone out of fashion. As soon as the going gets a little rough, people cut and run. We can change the vows to ones with more romantic language. But one thing is certain: sentimentality

is no substitute for loyalty.

Loyalty means being there, for better or worse.

So it is that in some way or another disloyalty always implies not being there. Disloyalty is desertion.

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Something else that loyalty means is standing with. The loyal person is the one who stands with another against the enemy - whoever or whatever the enemy may be. The loyal person rallies round his friend, or his boss, or the leader of his group. He stands up for the other person and if need be takes some of the return fire that is meant for the other.

Contrarywise, the loyal person is the one who does not engage in back-fence gossip and clubroom scandalmongering concerning people to whom he is bound in a relationship of trust.

Loyalty means standing with people and standing up for them. But right here we run into one of the most difficult kinds of problems in responsible living. It is known as the conflict of loyalties. How can you be loyal to two people whose interests conflict? How can you stand up for a person when you are unable to stand for what he is doing?

As Christians we possess a distinct advantage in our belief that there is a higher loyalty to which all people are bound. This means that to help a person do what is wrong out of a sense of loyalty would be terribly misguided. For that is only to help him betray his higher responsibility to what is right and thus to play traitor to himself.

Again as Christians we believe in agape, the love that comes in spite of human error. We can try to affirm the person even while we disassociate ourself from his actions.

But in practice it is very hard to live out distinctions like that. I suspect that in recent months many people in political life have found themselves in a bind over a conflict of loyalties. And they have had to bear the impatience of those of us outside the bind. Sometimes we may have felt that so and so was playing traitor to his colleague or his superior. At other times we may have berated this man for not tearing into that man more emphatically. But we must show some compassion, I think, and some respect too, for people who feel that personal loyalty forbids the denunciation of persons. No honorable person wants to hear the words spoken as he plunges in the dagger -

"And you too, Brutus?"

So loyalty means being there, and the opposite of that is desertion. And loyalty means standing with, and the opposite of that is betrayal. And there are times when it is hard to sort out the acts of loyalty from the betrayals.

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But there is still a third aspect to the quality of loyalty. We might call it keeping faith. We betray other people not only when we go against them personally, but when we abandon those values which they have shared with us. For example, Paul felt betrayed by Peter when he gave way to the

prejudice of others and refused to eat with Gentile Christians. Many black people feel betrayed when they find white people who have been outspoken on civil rights backing off on specific issues.

Loyalty means keeping faith with the values that bind us to other people. This is where people in public roles, not only politicians, but writers, teachers and even entertainers carry an especially heavy burden. For by presuming to influence others they create covenants of trust with those influenced by them.

Recently somebody pointed out to me an article referring to two recent books about a former teacher of mine. This man was one of the great religious thinkers of modern times. He profoundly influenced thousands of people. Yet here in these books it was revealed that he was a regular Don Juan. Last week I picked up one of those books at Minneapolis and another minister saw me with it. He told me that he had read the same article that prompted me to buy the book and that the article had given him a couple of rough nights. Then at the same time we both began talking about another article hinting at something sordid in the life of a church leader we had both known. We laughed that both of us had been reading the same articles and passing through the same disconcerting experience. It was clear that no matter how much we rationalized what we had read about these men, we both suffered from a sense of betrayal.

I am sure that many people suffered in the same way recently with respect to former vice-president Agnew. Some of us could not feel betrayed by Mr. Agnew because we felt he was a sinister person all along. But that should not blind us to the fact that many other people did regard him as a man of principle. Those people feel terribly let down.

But keeping faith in this way is not a challenge facing only people in public roles. We meet the challenge in family life too. Parents sometimes make the mistake of thinking that it is only when they are dealing directly with their children that the question of loyalty arises. They do not see that children feel betrayed when parents forsake their values in other relationships. In "The Death of a Salesman" Willie Loman never did understand how his infidelity to his wife permanently demoralized his son.

But children can betray their parents in the same way. Some young people today think that it shouldn't matter to their parents what values they live by so long as they are nice to their parents when they see them. They don't see that when a person forsakes the standards to which his family is committed he is in much the same position as a citizen who gives allegiance to a foreign nation. You can't separate personal loyalty from loyalty to those fundamental values that go into the making of persons.

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The quality of loyalty. It means being there, standing with, keeping faith. There is no quality more essential to human relationships. There is a sense in which the whole Christian life may be summed up as loyalty - loyalty to God, loyalty to righteousness, loyalty to the church, loyalty to other people.

We live in a time, I think, when the quality of loyalty is severely tested. In a world where people are so much on the move, it is hard to develop habits of steadfastness. In a world where institutions change and new lifestyles come into being, it is hard to know how to keep the faith.

But it is precisely in these times when so much that we once counted on slips away beneath our feet, that people need to be true to one another.

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That thought puts me in mind of another poem, not an old ballad, but a poem by a sophisticated Victorian, Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach." As the seas of faith fall back, the poet cries out -

"Ah, love, let us be true to one another!"

Perhaps that is the only place left to stand.

But in a world where Judas sells a man out, and Peter says he never knew the guy, and John simply runs away, in a world where lovers find other loves to be true to for a while, even that last bit of beach may be left high and dry. The Christian viewpoint is more realistic and yet more firmly grounded in hope. What gives us hope as Christians is the faith that in the midst of our own desertions and our own betrayals there is a love that will not let us go. Better than Arnold's famous line is this line from an ancient Christian hymn:

"If we are faithless, he remains faithful
For he cannot be false to himself."