

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA 22310
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Jeremiah 8:18—9:1
Luke 15:11–31

FAITH MATTERS II

We're in the middle of a sermon series that started last Sunday. The idea to preach a series of sermons on "Why go to Church," or more specifically "Why faith matters," came to me from another minister, and I don't want to pretend in any way that this was all my idea.

We all are aware that the church year doesn't really begin with Advent or even with the first of January. The church year begins afresh as we start back to school. Sermons are less about our vacation now and more about responsibility. Life has taken back on a familiar rhythm, and some of the activities that we associate with church have begun anew with fresh vigor and new vision. The church is alive. It was alive all summer, but now it's more visibly evident that we are a living, breathing organism. So the sermon series we are sharing is really about remembering why we start up again.

This sermon series idea came from a minister who was serving in Colorado, and now she's in charge of an entire district—what we call a presbytery, some churches call a district—named the Mile High Peaks District. Doesn't that sound more exciting than National Capital Presbytery? She had the idea to talk about why it is so important for us to attend church. Some of you have been very gracious this week and shared with me your own thoughts about this, and I have enjoyed reading each and every one.

The lectionary for today was supposed to be about the unjust steward, or if you will, the dishonest manager. But I've skipped to the story about the loving father even though you've already heard it earlier in the church year during Lent. But we hear about the prodigal again.

A lot of what Dr. Craddock said about last week's passages still applies. We described them all in the negative: the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son. But in reality the point of these stories is that the sheep was found, the coin was discovered, and the lost son that was dead was alive, all because heaven itself rejoices when we turn back to God.

So faith matters. It's about why we come to church. At one time or another, the reason we come to church is because we have behaved like one of this loving father's two children. Either we squandered our inheritance of forgiveness and forgot what was important because we spent too much time on what didn't matter, or we lived recklessly without regard for the consequences of our words or

our behavior all the while acting like we really were in charge. Or we lived like the other son, and we allowed a small hurt to fester and eventually we became bitter, even angry. Eventually something that was almost too small to mention became a barrier—a barrier between us and our church, a barrier between us and one another, and even a barrier between us and God.

We come to church in part because we see ourselves in this story. And though we can behave like a loving father, I fear that too often we find our identity with one of his two problem children. I don't believe that we wake up and say, "I think I want to go out today and squander my family savings. I think I want to go out today and focus on having one party after another and see just how many wild and crazy friends I can make."

I don't think we wake up and say, "Hmmm, I think I'll go to church and pretend to be holy and pure. I think I'll show up and act like a happy camper until I have a chance to really let somebody have it; you know, turn their day upside down."

In fact, we come to church to avoid being one of these problem children. We come because, whether we are the older or the younger, we know we are lost. We know there's a gap between whom we are called to be and the way in which we follow through. We readily admit that we are not perfect, that our intentions don't always shine through because our actions are so glaring. We don't live up to what we say we believe, do we? Sometimes we don't even live up to what we sing.

Last week, I asked you to go home and to show someone that they are loved. Last week, I charged you to forgive someone so completely that there was no doubt that you held anything against them. Last week, I asked you to try to convince somebody just how important they were to you, how important the relationship you shared was. Lo and behold, mid-week one of you called me and did exactly that—making sure that our relationship was okay. Suddenly I felt like the parishioner and not the minister. Suddenly I felt so humbled, because I know that what we really want to do is avoid being cruel to one another, to resist the temptation to be judgmental.

I know that the Holy Spirit works in all of us the same way in that we are called to surrender that tendency to keep our defenses strong, to keep the world and one another at arms length. Then why is it that doesn't happen? Why is it that we continue to live as if the way we treat one another doesn't connect to what we believe? It is so easy to forget how vulnerable we all are, and how this place makes us even more vulnerable. We all fall short of living up to the highest values we share. So should we just give up? Because there are so many "hurts" in our midst, should we just throw in the towel?

We're never going to get it completely right, are we? Is the game over? The older brother saw his younger sibling as selfish, arrogant, and sinful. But when you

read this story it's unavoidable, isn't it, that the older brother's heart was the one that was filled with darkness. Can we admit it? Can we admit, at least to ourselves, that we are incapable of being completely selfless? I think if we dare to confront that reality—that all of our actions, all of our thoughts, are infected with self-interest—then I think something wonderful can happen.

I believe we can be released from the bondage of the older brother's self-deceptions. You see, faith matters because God promises to help us grow beyond our instincts. God promises to help us experience something more than the younger brother's appetite or the older brother's envy.

Faith matters because even though Christians don't always hit the mark, even though sometimes we miss the target altogether, faith matters because we are still striving to be faithful disciples. Calvin would tell us that in that striving is the proof that our relationship with God is on track. Jesus Christ promises ... well, let me read it from the lectionary selection that was prescribed for today: "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much."

That's wonderful news. That's the best news we can have. If we will just risk being faithful in the smallest thing, God promises to make us faithful in the bigger issues of faith.

Okay, those of you who have been waiting, now here's your homework assignment. This week's homework is a little more difficult. As it should be, right? It's the second week of school. This week I want you to identify that small area of your life which is preventing you from being a faithful disciple. I know you may not feel comfortable sharing that with me, although it would be a huge compliment if you did, but I want you to answer it for yourself, at least.

If Jesus could change one small thing in your life, what would it be? What little thing, if it were removed, would unburden you on your journey? And then make that your petition, but identify it. Not the big stuff, but the little thing that has become like a grain of sand trapped between your sock and your sneaker.

Those who will be faithful in the small things, I will help be faithful in much.
Amen.