

‘FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT: FAITHFULNESS’

Galatians 5:22-23; Hebrews 11:1-3, 23-40

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A great deal depends on what one sees. The parents of Moses saw “a beautiful” child, and so they risked their lives in hiding him from the Egyptian authorities. After growing up in Pharaoh’s household, Moses saw a Hebrew slave being abused one day, and decided to cast his lot with the slaves. Years later, he would turn aside to see a bush burning without being consumed, and he would see the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and be reminded of the cries of those same slaves. After some persuasion, he would respond by faith and return to Egypt to finish the task. When the armies of Egypt pursued them and their backs were up against the sea, he saw in the sea a means of escape, and indeed, Pharaoh never troubled them again. Joshua saw in the walls defending Jericho, walls that could not stand against the might of God. Rahab saw in the spies not the enemy, but a savior.

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” says the author of Hebrews, and then goes on to describe what faith sees. Faith is not blind, as some people like to say. It just sees differently. It sees the invisible. It sees things that haven’t happened yet, but will. Faithfulness, the fruit of the Spirit that I’m talking about today, is to be full of faith, to persevere in seeing the things that others can’t yet see.

The same Greek word translates as either faith or faithfulness. The verb form means to trust. It is often translated as “believe.” After telling us that “God so loved the world,” John continues with “those who believe in him will have life eternal.” He’s not suggesting that those who believe in the existence of Jesus will live forever. The word always implies a relationship. James tells us that the demons believe in God’s existence, but it brings nothing to them but fear. They don’t see God through the eyes of faith.

Before talking about what faith sees, I want to mention “how” faith sees. In order to see the invisible, it requires a special sort of lens. In our series on the fruit of the Spirit, we’ve mentioned every week how they all seem to tie together. This is true with faithfulness as well. When we look on someone with love, we see something that others may not see. When we look upon the world with a desire for peace, we see possibilities that others don’t see. When we exercise patience, we pause long enough to see behaviors we might otherwise judge in a fuller context. Self-control overcomes the impulse to jump too quickly to judgment. Joy opens our eyes to the good things happening. The fruits of the Spirit form a lens through which we can see the world with hope, to see things that most people miss. Often when we judge a circumstance wrongly, we are barring the spirit from bearing the kind of fruit in our lives that God desires for us.

This is essentially the charge that James Cone makes against the church in its response to racism. He opens his most recent book, called *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, with the observation that few theologians have remarked on the symbolic similarities between crucifixion in Jesus’ day and lynching in the first half of the twentieth century. And none have developed the thesis at all.

He uses Reinhold Niebuhr, an ethicist for whom the cross serves as a primary symbol, as an example of this failure. You need to understand that Niebuhr is considered by many to be the greatest and most influential Christian thinker of his time. He wrote most extensively during the Jim Crow era and yet never came out strongly against racism. He was able to express outrage on a wide variety of social issues, but never about the injustices faced by black people. When the four girls were killed in the church bombing, his comments were academic and impersonal.

Concerning the protests of his day, Niebuhr wrote, "The Negroes will have to exercise patience and be sustained by a robust faith that history will gradually fulfill the logic of justice." Cone comments: "Niebuhr's call for gradualism... sounds like that of a southern moderate more concerned about not challenging the cultural traditions of the white South than achieving justice for black people.... It is hardly a moral act to encourage others patiently to accept injustice which he himself does not endure" (39)

Cone goes on to write: "It was easy for Niebuhr to walk around in his own shoes, as a white man, and view the world from that vantage point, but it takes a whole lot of empathic effort to step into those of black people and see the world through the eyes of African Americans." (40) Essentially Cone is saying that Niebuhr lacked the necessary empathy to view racism through the eyes of faith. When Paul lists patience as a fruit of the spirit, he is not suggesting that we urge patience on others; he is telling us that the spirit will work it in us.. One wonders how kindness, gentleness, generosity, love, and peace would have affected Niebuhr's understanding or insight into racism.

Cone writes in his first book: "It is the task of theology and the Church to know where God is at work so that we can join him in this fight against evil" (39 BT&BP). This what faith sees: God at work in the world. Faithfulness is being full of the vision of God at work. If we take Jesus as our cue for where we might see God at work, we'd find ourselves more often among the poor, the victims of injustice, among, as Jesus said, "those who have need of a physician."

This is not to say that God is not at work in a symphony, a work of art, a poem, a beautiful sunset, or the many celebrations of goodness and love. But these are not the places where faith wavers. Faith wavers in the face of evil, in the depth of grief, in the outrage of injustice, in the cruelties of life. It matters what and how we see in these times. That's where faithfulness makes a way for hope and forms a conviction of things not yet seen. This is where discipleship is lived out, where faith refuses to make room for despair, where we see the invisible God.

With faith, we don't see a wayward child, but a child of God. We don't see the embittered oppressed, but people who want to be free. By faith we view the stranger not as a threat, but as an essential part of the people of God. By faith we see God's fullness among the hungry, God's joy waiting to be sprung from those who mourn. Faith isn't a denial of human suffering, but a vision for a new reality.

I have to wonder whether Niebuhr's vision wasn't clouded by his "Christian realism." He was good at recognizing the limits in a given situation. He preferred being practical to being naïve. This was an important contribution to Christian ethical thinking, but I wonder sometimes if this doesn't lead to an inability to envision the impossible, to close down our peripheral vision where

the kingdom of God is trying to come into view. I think faith reminds us not to discard the impractical in our walk with Christ.

Eugene Peterson writes: "... if there is not all that much difference between the way of faith and the ways of the world, there is not much use in making any effort to stick to it" (131). It certainly requires perseverance to stick to faith, to be faithful, in the face of challenges, but God does it. We discover faith in God's faithfulness, in seeing God at work. Peterson says, "The central reality for Christians is the personal, unalterable, persevering commitment God makes to us... We survive in the way of faith not because we have extraordinary stamina but because God is righteous, because God sticks with us" (132).

This is the way of it with all the fruits of the spirit. We see these things in God, and we believe as God's children, that they can be implanted in us as well. A great deal depends on what one sees. Amen.

Resources:

Cone, James H. *Black Theology and Black Power*. The Seabury Press: New York NY. 1969

Cone James H. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY. 2011.

Peterson, Eugene H. *A Long Obedience in the same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*. IntervarsityPress: Downers Grove IL 2000.