

CONGREGATION
Information

Week 4
Faithfulness

How is God faithful to us? How are we faithful to God?

God's faithfulness is the major theme of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). The Hebrew word **hesed**, translated "steadfast love," describes God's merciful, tender, passionate, long-suffering, unconditional love for God's people. **Hesed** is love that is completely trustworthy, and is the standard for all relationships. Jesus' as a human model of **hesed** demonstrates love that was faithful to death, even death on a cross. The gift of the Holy Spirit to guide and empower the Church after Jesus' time on earth assures us that God's faithfulness to us will continue, even until the end of time.

We are not so trustworthy. We must constantly be reminded to be in intentional, loving, faithful relationship with God and with each other. We do this by spiritual practices, but they take . . . well, practice. Practice takes effort. Like athletes or musicians, that practice may be unnoticed or unappreciated, at least until the pressure's on. In times of crisis, we need to rely on relationships we have already established with God and other Christians. Through these relationships, God can transform our weakness and despair into an experience of God's unconditional love and faithfulness.

Spiritual friendship is a practice for much longer than a week. I describe it here as an option for you to consider longer term:

Spiritual friendship is when two people agree to give their attention to what God is doing in each other's lives, and to seek to help each other be faithful in following Jesus Christ. Spiritual friends commit to meet regularly for prayer listening, and reflection. The intent is not to give advice or fix problems, but to be intentional about sharing how they are experiencing God.

A spiritual friend need not be a social friend or a friend from church. It is someone whom you can trust, and someone who shares your desire to seek God's activity in your lives. Spiritual friends often set a regular weekly or monthly meeting time, and may structure their conversation to answer the following questions:

How have I experienced God's grace in the past week? For what am I thankful?

Where have I resisted God? What barriers have kept me from God?

For what do I need to be held accountable?

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One of the truths of Christian formation is that it is a life-long process. There is always more to learn and to experience about ourselves and God. Christian formation is never finished, although it may be derailed, or abandoned. Even when we struggle with or give up on our spiritual practice, we are not abandoned by God.

Health, personal, family, or other crises may become spiritual crises, as well. We feel that God is absent or that our prayers are ineffective. It may seem like God has withdrawn from us and we can no longer reach toward God. In the absence of environmental or organic reasons that make us depressed, those who make a serious commitment to a spiritual quest may experience what mystic St. John of the Cross called “the dark night of the soul.” This is a lived experience of separation or darkness. It is a process which often accompanies the need to let go of old patterns of behavior or belief in order to grasp new awareness. It is allowing some part of us to die so to make space for new life.

This cycle of death and new life is central to the Christian story of Jesus’ death and resurrection, but it is also embodied in our human growth and development. Children need to let go of childish behaviors and dependencies in order to function as mature adults. Spiritual maturity includes suffering and loss as the pathway to new life.

What have been significant losses in your life? How have these included death—literally, emotionally, spiritually?

How can we grow to spiritual maturity in a culture which seeks to deny death?

What new life has God brought? How did you experience God’s faithfulness directly or through other people?