

Call to Worship:

This Sunday is the last in our worship theme of Loyalty, and today I'm approaching the topic of fidelity in human relationships. In *The Screwtape Letters* by C. S. Lewis, one senior devil advises another about the challenges of their work seducing humans into bad behavior. The devil writes:

“[God is] a hedonist at heart. All those fasts and vigils and stakes and crosses are only a façade. Or only like foam on the seashore. Out at sea, out in His sea, there is pleasure, and more pleasure. He makes no secret of it; at His right hand are “pleasures for evermore.” Ugh!...He’s vulgar, Wormwood. He has a bourgeois mind. He has filled His world full of pleasures. There are things for humans to do all day long without His minding in the least—sleeping, washing, eating, drinking, making love, playing, praying, working. Everything has to be twisted before it’s any use to us. We fight under cruel disadvantages. Nothing is naturally on our side.”

Poor devil. In our hour of quiet praise, may we find a way to untwist ourselves from shame and blame, and seek a faithful way in this world of pleasures for evermore. Let us worship together.

Opening Hymn: 348 Guide My Feet

Reading: “Consuming Desire” by Katrina Vandenberg

I’m not making this up. In Cafe Latte’s wine bar
one of the lovely coeds at the next table
touched John on the arm as if I wasn’t there
and said, *Excuse me, sir, but what
is that naughty little dessert?*

And I knew from the way he glanced
at the frothy neckline of her blouse,
then immediately cast his eyes on his plate
before giving a fatherly answer,
he would have given up dessert three months
for the chance to feed this one to her.
I was stunned; John was hopeful;
but the girl was hitting on his cake.

Though she told her friend until they left
she did not want any. I wish she wanted
something—my husband, his cake, both at once.
I wish she left insisting
upon the beauty of his hands, his curls,
the sublimeness of strawberries
and angel food. But she was precocious,
and I fear adulthood is the discipline
of being above desire, cultivated
after years of learning what you want
and where and how, after insisting
that you will one day have it. I don't
ever want to stop noticing a man like the one
at the bar in his loosened tie, reading
the *Star Tribune*. I don't want to eat my cake
with a baby spoon to force small bites,
as women's magazines suggest. And you
don't want to either, do you? You want a big piece
of this world. You would love to have the whole thing.

Sermon: Fidelity

“Adulthood is the discipline
of being above desire.”

And yet, to be human is to desire.

“You want a big piece of this world.

You would love to have the whole thing.”

When I was in college 20 years ago, I had a friend, Jason, and we watched wrestling together.

Every Monday night or whatever it was, we would watch Smackdown, and talk about our romantic struggles.

Wrestling was a soap opera with spine-busting: there were kidnappings, comas, love triangles, heels and heroes.

As the villain Triple H courted owner’s daughter Stephanie McMahon in the ring,

my friend Jason and I talked about his new girlfriend.

Jason was a 20 year old guy, and had just fallen head over heels in love for the first time. His new girlfriend was his world. It was adorable.

But a few months in, he experienced something that shook him to his core, and he didn’t know how to talk to her about it.

So, as young guys tend to do, he just got all weird.

After a week of him acting weird, she said,

“Look, you need to tell me what is wrong.”

And finally he told her—he had seen a young woman on the subway, and he had found himself...attracted to this stranger. And he had thought, now that he was in love, truly in love, he wouldn't ever feel that way towards another woman.

Like Jimmy Carter, he felt he had betrayed his beloved in his heart, if not his actions.

And my friend's sweet and wise girlfriend said, "Honey, of course you are going to feel attraction to other people. I do too. We are human beings. The point is, we can talk about anything, and what matters is our actions and how we treat each other."

My friend was astonished.

He felt seen, forgiven, understood, and truly loved even more.

I was in awe of how cool and mature they were.

Their relationship was a role model that I aspired to ever since—the way they communicated, cared, never judged.

They got married and have two adorable kids I've watched grow up on Facebook.

And, in the wrestling world, Triple H and Stephanie McMahon got married in real life and are still married with three kids, so, love is real, kids.

When I'm meeting with a couple to plan their wedding, I do what I call "The Greatest Hits of Pre-Marital Counseling."

Meaning, I bring out the four big topics I think couples need to talk about, and lay them on the table.

The topics are Religion, Kids, Money, and Sex.

There are a lot of ways to be faithful to someone.

And there are a lot of ways to be unfaithful.

Humans want to have our cake, and eat it too. A big piece!

It used to be, according to relationship researchers, that sex caused the most issues in long-term relationships.

But now, research shows that money is the root cause of most divorces, not extramarital affairs.

So in my pre-marital counseling sessions,

I encourage couples marrying to be honest with each other about their debt, their goals, and their relationship with money.

Financial infidelity can wound a marriage as deeply, or even more deeply, than sexual infidelity.

Secret purchases, secret credit cards, secret gambling; secret texting, secret feelings, secret relationships—

it's the secrets that make the infidelity, and financial infidelity has the added pain of possible bankruptcy or poverty.

Psychotherapist and author Esther Perel is an international expert on fidelity and infidelity.

If you are in a covenant group, one of our small groups of folks who meet each month to share meaningful conversation,

you hopefully have done the spiritual exercise for this month.

Anyone can do the spiritual exercise,

it is printed in the order of service:
this month's is to watch Esther Perel's 2015 TED talk,
reflect on some questions about it,
and discuss it with your covenant group.

Perel says that "because there is no universally agreed-upon definition of what even constitutes an infidelity, estimates [of its frequency] vary widely, from 26 percent to 75 percent."

That's quite a delta.

Perel describes the person committing infidelity as
"finding themselves in

a conflict between their values and their behavior."

A conflict between their values and their behavior.

What we say, and what we do.

As Perel points out from her research,

"Humans are walking contradictions.

95 percent of people will say that it is terribly wrong for our partner to lie about having an affair,

but just about the same amount will say that that's exactly what we would do if we were having one."

Adrienne Marie Brown, a black feminist activist, writes:

We begin learning to lie in intimate relationships at a very early age.

Lie about the food your mother made,

[lie] to avoid punishment, ...

[lie] about the love you want and how you feel.
Most of this is taught as heteropatriarchy 101:
men love one way, women another, and we have to lie to
impress and catch each other.
We learn that love is a limited resource and that the love we
want and need is too much, that we are too much.
We learn to shrink, to lie about the whole love we need,
settling with not quite good enough in order to not be alone.
We have to engage in an intentional practice of honesty to
counter this socialization.

As the poet says,
We fear adulthood is the discipline
of being above desire.
But our hearts want a big piece of this world.
We would love to have the whole thing.

Of course one of the worst infidelities of all in this modern age
of technology is watching ahead in a streaming tv show you
promised not to watch without your partner—I know,
abominable, am I right?

It all comes down to wanting what we think we can't have.

Infidelity is a broken promise,
and broken promises come in all shapes and sizes.

On the positive side, I think fidelity comes down to its Latin root: faith.

Putting your faith in someone else, and being worth of having faith put in you.

That applies to romantic relationships, and friendships too.

A relationship in good faith: where things are not necessarily perfect, but they are caring, and they are honest.

You can speak the truth in love, and receive it in return.

The truth can sometimes be painful, and love can sometimes go astray.

Faith can be messy and unclear sometimes, that's what makes it faith and not belief.

Fidelity is about trust, not control.

We can have faith in another person,

but we can't *know* all of who they are in their innermost heart.

Most people hardly manage to know all of who we ourselves are inside over the course of our lives,

even if you went to therapy every day!

So faith is precious gift that we offer to someone, and faith is a precious thing to receive: a sacred blessing.

I think of fidelity as similar to trying to righteousness, a word that gets a bad rap because it is so often paired with the word "self."

One way to translate the word “righteous” in the Hebrew language, *tzedakah*, is “aiming true.”

You don’t have to be a perfect person to be faithful; but you have to try to “aim true,” even if sometimes you get distracted by cake or attractive face.

The arrow can fly in a direction we didn’t expect, but with the next arrow, we try to aim true once again, and again.

A faithfulness of effort, of returning again, of honesty.

The heart of fidelity is aiming faithfully at trust and truth, openness and compassion, with the goal of deeper connection.

It used to be in pre-marital counseling that when I raised the topic of sex, I assumed that their interpretation of fidelity was monogamy.

But over the years, I have learned to question my own assumptions, and stopped placing them on others.

In the past ten years, in addition to Perel’s TED talks and books,

There are more and more articles in newspapers and magazines and more and more television shows referencing a rising truth:

for many people today,

fidelity does *not* necessarily equal monogamy.

Fidelity can exist in monogamous and non-monogamous relationships.

And, infidelity can exist in monogamous and non-monogamous relationships.

More and more I have come to see that fidelity means faithfulness, and each relationship may contain its own definition of what being faithful means.
When people are creative and honest, new possibilities arise.

Dan Savage has been writing his “Savage Love” advice column for decades, and from there became a podcaster, author, and expert on sexuality.

His column and podcast are sort of like if our UU comprehensive sexuality education class for 8th graders, Our Whole Lives, really lasted our whole lives.

There is always something new to learn.

Reflecting on his own relationship with his husband, he coined the term “monogamish.”

He educates and advises about consensual, ethical nonmonogamy.

He wrote this advice in response to one recent letter from someone who was struggling to be monogamous in her new marriage:

Monogamy works for some people (even some people who are hard-wired or predisposed to non-monogamy), it doesn't work for others.

Some people find monogamy effortless, some find it impossible.

Some people would rather cheat (or be cheated on) than be in an honest and open non-monogamous relationship; some people want freedom... (and so they cheat) but can't handle the thought of their partners... [having freedom] (and so they police).

Some people are capable of honoring a lifelong monogamous commitment even if it's a struggle.

And what works for someone or some couples right now about monogamy or non-monogamy may not work for them always.

There are lots of non-monogamous couples out there who used to be monogamous and lots of monogamous couples who used to be open. It's a constant struggle.

Fidelity—of any variety—takes work.

Monogamy has only one rule, and that's apparently too hard for 25-75% of people to follow.

Consensual non-monogamy might have many rules—guidelines about safety, practices, people, all kinds of rules to stay faithful to your partners.

On the one hand,

you might be able to have that naughty little dessert.

On the other hand,

you might have to talk with your partner or partners about how much of that dessert you are allowed to have, and how often, and in what manner, and when, for many many hours.

The non-monogamous people that I know are expert communicators...and schedulers.

All this honest communication takes a lot of time and energy and calendaring!

Scholar Tammy Nelson,

who published a book titled *The New Monogamy* 8 years ago, says that “honesty and transparency” are the guiding principles underlying the healthiest [non-monogamous] marriages.

The couples [she talked to] did not perceive their desire to see other people as a symptom of dysfunction

but rather as a fairly typical human need

that they thought they were up to the challenge of navigating.¹

Some people called what they were doing polyamory,

“but most of the couples she was seeing did not feel the need to name what they were doing at all.”

The label didn't matter.

What mattered was the communication, the trust, the honesty.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/11/magazine/is-an-open-marriage-a-happier-marriage.html>

Infidelity is when we find our values in conflict with our behavior.

Ultimately, fidelity calls us not only to be a partner in good faith to another, but also to be faithful to ourselves, the person we want to be, even when it's hard.

Fidelity asks us to boldly, truthfully, lovingly name our values, and then, to be true to them.

In seeking that kind of fidelity, a person may also find the self they were looking for all along.

The poet writes:

I don't want to eat my cake
with a baby spoon to force small bites,
as women's magazines suggest. And you
don't want to either, do you? You want a big piece
of this world. You would love to have the whole thing.

My friends, in your search to live a life of good faith,
may you be honest and true.

May you have your cake, and eat it too.

Amen.

Closing Hymn: 317 We Are Not Our Own

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