

Fidelity: Staying True & Staying Still

Matthew 13.3-9, 24-35

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When David and I first met, we were both in our early 20s. I was training for the Baptist ministry and he was preparing to be a Benedictine monk. I often stayed at the monastery where David lived. We talked together about all sorts of things, but most often about our respective calls to ministry.

As we sat together at the refectory table, he once told me about his passion for surfing and his long-held dream to surf professionally. In fact, despite his monk's habit, David looked every bit the surfer—tall, blonde hair, suntanned with that easy, laid back manner. He told me his call to the monastery came one cold autumn day as he sat on his board waiting for a wave. As he looked out across the surface of the water and into the sky beyond, he heard God's voice. Unmistakable, he said it was. Several years later and after a long period of discernment, David was about to make his final vows to the community. As with all Benedictines, this included a vow of stability.

It was as David walked me over the monastery grounds that I began to understand just what this particular vow meant. We stopped at the small graveyard in a shaded corner of the compound. It was just a handful of graves, each one marked by a simple headstone commemorating a brother who had passed away. 'This is where I'll be buried one day,' David said matter-of-factly. To hear those words from a young

man my own age was confronting. His vow of stability meant that this small community would be his home for the rest of his life. I couldn't imagine. When I thought of the call of God I thought most immediately of a call to change and movement, not stability. But in that moment I saw something modelled that I've never been able to forget.

Over this series of six Sundays, we are exploring values that are central to the Christian faith. So far we've considered beauty and integrity. Today it's fidelity. It's an odd little word, fidelity. It's not used much these days. In essence, it has to do with loyalty and faithfulness, two characteristics that lie at the heart of who God is and what God is about. But what does it mean for you and I to be people of fidelity? What does it mean for us to

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reflect the loyalty and faithfulness of God? It means many things but today I want to focus on just two. Fidelity has to do with faithfulness to the people and places

of our lives. It's a commitment to staying true and staying still.

Staying true

Change is everywhere. It's one of the few constants in modern life. In fact, change has become so routine it now shapes our lives. Even more, change has become a value by which we measure a good and successful life. The language of movement, progress and change is in stark contrast to the language of stagnation and stillness. Sadly, this addiction to change impacts our

relationships. Fidelity is to do with staying true, staying true to the relationships that we already have. Fidelity is a commitment to the relational soil in which we're planted, allowing it to become deep and fertile ground. But in our networked society, most encounters are momentary and relationships are valued according to returns. If the returns are not immediate, we move on to more attractive ground. And the options are endless. Consequently, we spend our time circling relationships, diving in, extracting what we need, and flying on to the next encounter.

The deep and lasting work of relationships takes time. Nothing of real value happens quickly. Fidelity, the discipline of staying true to people over the long haul, is a character shaping one of the most significant kind. I have a friend. I'll call him James. James has been in my life since his 15th birthday. Today he is close to 40. I walked with him through a painful adolescence and a torrid and destructive home life. He lived with me for a while, before finding his way into a university course and then a marriage. Sadly the marriage failed and so did his health. The death of his father and his brother's mental illness were crises that left their mark. He has moved from job to job, never settling, never finding himself. His relationship with his two children is strained. Just a few weeks back I attended his second wedding. To be honest, the friendship is occasionally exhausting, often difficult to maintain in the midst of my own busyness and sometimes my unspoken desire is just to move on. But I can't. Too many others have done so, and to walk away now would be to deny the value of what we have, for both him and me.

The call to fidelity is a call to be true to deep and lasting relationships. It is costly and sometimes painful and the gains are not easily named. But the alternative, being relationally promiscuous, does nothing but prod at shallow and

unproductive soil, filling up our lives and calendars with endless encounters that have no lasting consequence.

Staying still

Just as change is a constant in our lives, so too is movement. We are on the go. Just as change is now a value that shapes our lives, so too is mobility. As far back as 1970, the futurist Alvin Toffler noted the impact of mobility on our lives:

'Never has distance meant less. Never has man's relationships with place been more numerous, fragile or temporary. Throughout the advanced technological societies ... commuting, traveling, and regularly relocating one's family have become second nature. Figuratively, we 'use up' places and dispose of them in much the same way we dispose of Kleenex or beer cans. We are witnessing a historical decline in the significance of place to human life. We are breeding a new race of nomads, and few suspect quite how massive, wide-spread and significant their migrations are.'

More recently, the sociologist Fiona Allon has labelled Australian society 'geographically promiscuous', with one of the highest rates of residential and daily-life mobility in the world. We are moving from one set of relationships to another and from one place to the next at rapid pace, and with scant regard for the consequences.

Let's be honest, mobility comes with a certain cultural glamour. We aspire to be upwardly mobile—constantly moving onward and away—believing that the alternative is some sort of downward monotony. To stay still for too long seems almost quaint and old-fashioned.

Fidelity is not only about faithfulness to people. It's about loyalty to places and communities. Though we cannot live in a bubble—we certainly cannot extract

ourselves from a world of movement and mobility—the call to fidelity requires at some level a commitment to staying still, to putting down roots in deep and sustaining soil.

The Solider & the Farmer

Today's reading is taken from Matthew 13. It's a series of parables or stories Jesus told to illustrate the kingdom of God. More than anything, I want you to notice who the central characters are in these parables. Look back through the chapter and you'll notice they are farmers, fishermen and homemakers. These are stories about the most ordinary people going about their daily business and in so doing discovering the presence and purposes of God.

As I read the New Testament, I am struck by two very different images of discipleship, two contrasting ways of responding to the call of God. For me, my earliest sense of what it means to be of follower of Jesus was gathered up in the image of the soldier. It's a military image; one that embodies the acts of relinquishment and leaving. With Jesus as my captain I am called to turn away from civilian pursuits, relinquish all ties, responsibilities and possessions, put on the armour of God, pack my suitcases and be ready to go at a moments notice and wherever the captain orders. In this image is the most tangible response to Jesus words, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel.' It's an inspiring image and one that many missionaries and pastors have experienced as life-changing. What's more, it's the image of discipleship I've heard preached on more times than I can remember.

But there is another image of discipleship in the New Testament that doesn't get noticed quite as much. It's the image of the farmer. While the call of the soldier entails relinquishment, movement and transience, the call of the farmer is much more mundane—it's about stability, putting down roots in one place and one

community. It's a much more domestic image. The farmer is the one who gives a lifetime's investment in one piece of land, working the same ground year in and year out. It's the repetitive work of sowing, nurturing and harvesting, sowing, nurturing and harvesting. The annual cycles of the land are routine and predictable. The farmer is likely to not even own a suitcase. Going is not an option. Staying is how the farmer lives out his call.

The truth is, when it comes to the spiritual glamour stakes, the image of the solider wins hands down. When the solider returns from deployment in some far off land to tell us of her service, it all sounds so exciting, demanding and so much more significant that the dullness of our ordinary lives. Farming just doesn't hold the same cache. But when it comes to fidelity, it's the image of the farmer that resonates most easily.

Fidelity now

Collins Street Baptist Church is a spiritual home to some extraordinary people, men and women who have served the life and ministry of this church with incredible faithfulness. Men and women who have been showing up here, Sunday after Sunday, month after month, year after year, decade after decade, for more years than I have been alive. They have stayed true and have stayed still when the pull to leave has been strong, when the discouragements have been deep and the lure of greener suburban fields so attractive. That's fidelity. Others have stayed true to their neighbourhoods. When everyone else was upgrading and moving on, these people stayed, investing in one place and one community. That's fidelity. Then there are those who have stayed true to relationships, to friendships, when it would have been so easy to walk away. That's fidelity. These people, many of them sitting here this morning, have sown and re-sown in the same field, the same soil, the same circle

over so many years. You teach me more about this value of fidelity than you will ever know.

You see, when we talk about fidelity we're not addressing something on a high and holy plane. We are talking about something so everyday, so ordinary we barely notice it. Yet through it we touch something of God. We sang the hymn earlier today about God's great faithfulness, his mercies new every morning, an unchanging and unfailing God who will never leave us nor forsake us. Through the small fidelities of our own lives, through those ordinary acts of staying true and staying still, we mirror the faithfulness of God.

My friend David is still there in that Benedictine community. Like me, he's older, not quite as slim, but still committed to God's calling upon his life. He doesn't surf anymore ... hasn't done for some years. I haven't seen him for a while, but I did read something he wrote a couple of years ago. In it he reflected on the fact that sometimes he still daydreams about life as a professional surfer, but never for long. As difficult as his path as been, his commitment to the people and the place of his community has enriched his life immeasurably, often in the most imperceptible ways. And when he walks past that little cemetery, he is oddly comforted, he says, by the certainty of where his earthly life will end.

Fidelity: staying true and staying still. It's a challenge to each of us, but a challenge very much within our reach.
