

“The Loyalty of Aaron Feuerstein”

Hebrews 13:1-8,15-16

preached on September 6, 2009

I am a fan of the Baltimore Orioles. I have followed the Orioles for a long time, since Brooks Robinson was a rookie. That goes back quite a ways. Over the years there were times when it was real easy to be an Oriole fan. They played sound baseball, and had a lot of wins. But in recent years it's been a lot tougher. Not only haven't they had a winning record for a decade, but in the last couple of years, they don't seem to know that the season continues after the all star break. They might get our hopes up early in the year, but come September, it can be depressing. So a lot of people have turned away from them. But they are my team, and I will continue to be a fan.

Speaking of baseball, two years ago an amazing thing happened. Cal Ripken and Tony Gwynn were installed in the Hall of Fame, and both of them deserved it. They were great players. The unusual thing was that both of them played their entire career with one team. In the days of free agency that is unheard of. Someone waves a bunch of money at a player and they are gone. There is no loyalty to the team or the town or the fans. Of course teams don't have a whole lot of loyalty either. Over the past few years new stadiums were built in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh got a new arena, too, so the Penguins wouldn't leave town. Cities are often blackmailed by sports franchises. And it is the general public who ends up paying the bill, both through taxes and ticket prices.

For decades I have watched and listened to the news coming out of Hershey. For many years, Hershey Chocolate has been downsizing the factory and threatening to leave completely. How can you have Hershey without Hershey Chocolate? The town was built around the factory. The street lights are Hershey Kisses. But the company is ready to toss all that tradition, all that history in the name of more profit. There is no loyalty to the workers, or to the town that nourished and nurtured the company. We look around our world and it does not take long to discover that there is no loyalty among the players, the teams, politicians, or industry. Where in the world can we find loyalty?

Let me introduce you to Aaron Feuerstein. Aaron Feuerstein owned a textile mill. Malden Mills. They were the company that invented Polar Fleece. They were doing well. But in the 70's and 80's textile companies were on the move. They went from the northeast to lands with warmer climates and lower wages. Some claimed it was so they could lower prices and become more competitive, but the reality is that it was done for more profit. Aaron Feuerstein looked at the trend and wanted nothing to do with it. He said he would keep the Malden Mills factory in Lawrence, Massachusetts. He said that the town trusted him, that they needed those jobs, and he wouldn't let them down. And all the industry analysts were amazed at his loyalty to people over profit.

Then tragedy struck. Fire broke out in the mills, one of the largest fires in New England's history. By the next morning the mills had been reduced to rubble and ashes. The experts knew that this was Feuerstein's out. He was now in his 70's. He could take the insurance settlement and run away. No one could blame him for that. Only he didn't. The next morning he held a news conference where he said that all his employees would continue to get their full pay for the next month. And he would pay their benefits as well. A month later, he announced that one month wasn't enough. He would continue to pay salaries and benefits while the mill was being rebuilt. And the industry analysts thought he had gone off the deep end. Even when some of his employees, those he was paying even though they weren't working, when those same employees sued him, he felt sorry for them. He said that they were poor people. And when unscrupulous attorneys throw astronomical settlement figures at them, they just couldn't resist. Aaron Feuerstein was so loyal that he forgave those employees for their lack of loyalty.

Years ago, Susan Stamberg interviewed Aaron Feuerstein for a special radio series on loyalty for NPR’s Morning Edition. He said that his actions weren’t heroic. It was just good citizenship. He said he decided to keep his workers on the payroll after the fire because “It was the right thing to do.” His actions reflected one way “to save” his community and his people. They needed him and he did not forsake them. Without his grace their futures would have crashed. Without his steadfast loyalty, their personal downturns would have been terminal.

The loyalty series prompted Stamberg to speak with teenagers, sports fans, and military leaders as well as Mr. Feuerstein on the subject of loyalty. Some insights inspired. Like in the military. In the realm of military life, Susan Stamberg discovered that loyalty continues to be an honored value. According to one high-ranking officer, loyalty remains one of the very first values taught to soldiers. When Marines declare SEMPER FI, always faithful, they are referring to more than a motto. According to Lieutenant General Theodore Stroup the bonding created in military training inspires soldiers to fight even more for “each other” than for the flag. Loyalty undergirds everything. When soldiers trust that they will be taken care of first by their units and then by their country, an environment of security and confidence thrives and the country is well-served. Soldiers who break rank do so at their own peril because unity saves lives. Often the church needs to remember that, that loyalty to Jesus, that unity in the Church Universal enables salvation to come to many. Unity for unity’s sake is no big deal. But unity in Christ, and loyalty to Christ can and will change the world.

Some interviews inspired, but others sadly revealed the sorrow of the human condition. Most demonstrated that while hope springs eternal, loyalty springs occasional. For example, for most teenagers, fidelity is judged on a case-by-case basis. Say you have a date scheduled, but then out of the blue your extremely cool fantasy crush who didn’t seem to know your name not only knows your name but wants to get together the same night as the other date? Not a problem. You just ditch Date #1. Or Best Friend tells you her deep dark secrets and begs you never to tell? “Cross my heart and swear by the power of American Idol’s ratings.” Yes, but what if the secret is drug use? What if the secret is bulimia? Stamberg found that whether the issue involves boyfriends, school, drugs, or health, everything depends on the circumstances. Loyalty ebbs and loyalty flows. It all depends on the situation.

One of my frustrations in dealing with youth over the years has been about their sense of loyalty to the church. I have often been amazed at their lack of commitment. In most churches I have served I have worked to establish work camps. That first one is always a major battle because we need to make a commitment in the fall for the following summer. Many youth like the idea, but they want to wait until the week before the camp to make the commitment. It can’t work that way. Once we have a couple of camps under our belt, it gets easier to recruit. But it is hard to get kids to make a commitment, especially if they are convinced that they are not going to be entertained. The idea of reaching out to serve for the sake of service, out of compassion for another is foreign to many. Our church camps have suffered from the same attitude. When I directed camps, each year we would be adding campers right up to the day of camp. It is hard to prepare if you don’t know who or how many you are preparing for. I believe that this attitude has developed over the years because our young ones are so worried that if they make a commitment to one thing, they will miss out on something else. They are so worried about missing something else that they fail to live and learn, to enjoy and appreciate the experiences unfolding around them.

There is little or no loyalty to the activities, to the fellowship and education within the church. And the really sad thing is that this is an attitude that they have learned from the society around them, and also from their parents. Often I talk to a parent who tells me how important it is for their children to learn the lessons of faith, to hear the stories of the scripture. If that is so important, the best way to teach them is to regularly show up at church related activities with them. That means every week, or say 48 weeks a year. You see, when we send a

child but do not attend Sunday School and Worship with them, we are undermining the authority of the church and the power of a living faith that we are trying to instill in them. Otherwise we teach them that loyalty to one another, loyalty to the Church, loyalty to Jesus Christ is not that important. Every year I hear that a child or a family can't be in worship because of football, soccer or cheerleading. Are football, soccer, and cheerleading really more important than a connection to Jesus Christ?

In the field of business, the loyalty which once bonded individual workers to a single company for one's entire career went out with the IBM Selectric. Loyalty fluctuates with the market. When profits rise, loyalty swells. But when profits tank, loyalty often dissolves. We jump on the winners and abandon the losers. Aaron Feuerstein shines as the exception to the rule of personal profits first. Business, for Feuerstein, is also about fidelity and trust, about the way we treat people.

If Feuerstein, a Hebrew, were to read the Letter to the Hebrews, he'd find a mix of not-so-exceptional rules for life: continue to love each other, be hospitable, remember prisoners and victims of torture, honor marriage, relinquish the love of money, remember your spiritual leaders. Who can argue with these words? Such bits of wisdom are sprinkled throughout Scripture from Proverbs to Paul. But in the midst of these maxims, a stunning pronouncement leaps off the page: “*Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever.*” (Hebrews 13:8) Excuse me? Nothing lasts forever. Isn't that another popular adage? Once the dot com millionaires were the talk of the town. The President at the time even declared that the financial cycles were a thing of the past. We had a clear road ahead of us. And then the bubble burst. The scenario played out again just a year ago only this time it was over real estate lending. Just 15 months ago, Congressional officials assured us that Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac were on solid financial footing. We were told and believed that real estate prices would soar forever. And then forever came real quick. Last year's committed relationship is this year's bad memory. Isn't that the way life goes? Nothing lasts forever. No relationship. No success. No fortune.

Even so, some industrial giants strive to do the right thing. They're not all Aaron Feuersteins, but foundations are created to “give something back” to society. Workers are encouraged to volunteer their time and donate their money. Nevertheless profit margins reign supreme. If the factory burns down, nobody expects the boss to continue paying benefits. If the profits are down, nobody expects the Board of Directors NOT to lay off workers. If things nose-dive, nobody expects loyalty to count for much.

The scripture says, “*Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have.*” (Hebrews 13:5) Yeah right. Such words run counter to everything Forbes magazine preaches. The love of money drives us all, not just the CEO-wannabe's. Being content with what we have is anathema to every subtle, and not so subtle message bombarded on us by the advertising industry. We live for advancement! We strive for the raise! We cast our hopes on the Christmas bonus! We want bigger, better, more and more. And God help us if we are ever bored. Semper Fi, always faithful ... at least until a better opportunity comes along.

In the midst of this constantly changing world, Jesus stands as the exception to standard operating procedure to all the accepted rules of business. In a world where everything changes, Jesus is a rock. In a world where the downtrodden are abandoned, Jesus hangs with the least among us. He said, “*I will never leave you or forsake you.*” (Hebrews 13:5) As Moses once reminded the children of Israel and as the Psalmist once sang, God hangs tough always. And this never changes.

These simple, ordinary prescriptions for life found in today's text are really about an increasingly extraordinary quality: LOYALTY. Like the Hebrews, we have succeeded in expressing love. This instructs us to keep it up. We've lost the mandate to be loyal to strangers, who just might be angels in disguise, and to those in prison because, frankly, it feels a little risky these days. Loyalty to our partners? Well sure, but we all know that vows

were made to be broken. Things happen. We strive to be loyal in our work lives because our lifestyles depend on it. Without our jobs, who are we? Without our paychecks, what would happen to us? Without our savings, where is our security? But then, every once in a while, we realize that life is more than work; relationships are more than career-enhancing connections; and success is more than money. Sometimes, it takes a disaster or some test of faith to jolt us back from the always changing whirl of this world to the never-changing world of God’s realm.

When Pilate asked Jesus, “*What is truth?*” (John 18:38) he had no idea what a good question he posed. It used to be true that the world was flat. Then it was true that the world was round. Then it was true that the earth was egg-shaped and threatened to be blown into smithereens by bombs that some called Apeacekeepers.” It used to be true that one stayed with a single company for 40 years and then that company took care of retirees until death. Now it’s true that companies trade workers and workers trade companies like dancers switch partners. It used to be true that couples promised to stay together “till death” and that sports fans cheered for the home team in classic ball fields, and that spiritual leaders led all the polls that ranked trustworthiness. Now couples irreconcilably differ and home teams leave for cities with a better tax base to build a better stadium and the most trustworthy career is nursing.

Through it all, Jesus remains the same yesterday, today and forever. When what we have loved fails us or leaves us, One remains who promises never to forsake us. In a world where change can terrify, where a poor or foolish decision can lead us to depths in which we don’t want to dwell, these words shock the senses: “*The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me if God, if my Lord, Jesus, is with me?*” (Hebrews 13:6) What an amazing promise. Do we believe it? Do we believe God could possibly be as loyal, maybe even more loyal than Aaron Feuerstein? Amazing to consider, but if we test Him, we will find it is true. For Jesus will not leave us. He will watch over us and strengthen us and bless us, as individuals, and as a congregation. He will be loyal to us no matter what we go through. He is worthy of placing your life in his hands, this day and everyday. So in your life may it be so. Amen.