

□ In addition to the practice of imitating a fellow flesh-and-blood pilgrim—or as a temporary alternative for those not yet ready to take up such a practice—we would do well to immerse ourselves in the stories of the saints across the centuries. If Christians are to resist having their imaginations stunted by the relatively narrow repertoire of stories circulated by the dominant culture, we will need to recover and begin circulating among ourselves a much wider set of stories. The stories of the people of God across time and space are capable not only of inspiring us by reminding us of God's goodness and faithfulness, but they are also capable of enriching our parochial notions of God's goodness and God's desires of and for us. Hence, those who seek to have the fruit of goodness cultivated in their lives would do well to immerse themselves in the stories of those Christian saints across time and space whose lives have already borne this fruit. By allowing such "good seed" to be sown in our hearts and imaginations, we take an important and necessary first step toward allowing the fruit of goodness to be cultivated in our own lives.

Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith. (Gal 6:7-10)

EIGHT

Cultivating Faithfulness in the Midst of Impermanence

But as for that [seed] in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance. (Lk 8:15)

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. (Heb 10:23)

The story has been repeated so many times that we know it almost by heart. The group began in 1990 with seventy men and a football coach. The following year 4,200 men attended the first official rally. In 1992 over five times that many came, and the next year 50,000 men packed into a single stadium in Denver, Colorado. In 1994 the rallies spread to seven stadiums around the country, with attendance topping 275,000. This phenomenal growth continued during the next three years, with attendance at twenty-four stadium rallies in 1997 reaching 1.25 million.

Whatever one thinks of the Promise Keepers movement, their growth during the early 1990s was nothing short of phenomenal. The movement also worked hard to get racial reconciliation on the agenda of many churches that had long ignored the implications of the gospel for that area of their lives.

Moreover, their very name—Promise Keepers—drew national attention to a practice that is vital to any society but rarely discussed: the making and keeping of promises. One might assume, given the chord that the Promise Keepers movement has struck, that plenty of people find such activities difficult within the dominant culture. Why might this be so? At their root, promise making and promise keeping presume a willingness to bind oneself to another person or group of people. Are there features of the dominant culture that inhibit our willingness to so bind ourselves? Before attempting to answer that question, we need to examine more carefully what this fruit of the Spirit entails.

The Character of Faithfulness

Like each of the fruit, the Spirit's fruit of faithfulness has its roots in the very character of God. When we allow the Spirit to do its work in our lives, we do not simply become more human; we also become more like God, in whose image we were created. That image is slowly but most assuredly being restored by the work of Christ through his Spirit.

The Greek word that Paul uses in his list in Galatians is *πίστις*, the same word that in other contexts is translated as "faith." Although some of the older translations render this fruit as "faith," given the clear ethical character of the fruit previously listed, a better rendering may be "faithfulness." It would be a mistake, however, to drive a wedge between these two meanings, since there is an obvious connection between faith as trust and faithfulness as trustworthiness. Or said another way, if we stop thinking of faith in purely cognitive terms and accentuate instead faith's character as trust, then faith itself will be seen to have ethical implications. Surely one's life is profoundly shaped by whether, whom, what, when and how one trusts. Once we recover this richer sense of faith, we are in a better position to see God's double claim on our lives: God calls us both to trust God (who is trustworthy) and to emulate God's trustworthiness. Trust requires steadfastness. Trust cannot be fickle, but must be constant and firm. Thus Paul tells the Colossians that he rejoices to see the "firmness" of their faith and encourages them to continue to live their lives in Christ Jesus, "rooted and built up in him and established

in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving" (Col 2:5-7).

In the Old Testament the Hebrew words that modern versions routinely translate as "faithfulness" are *"mei"* and *"mīnā*. In older translations these words were often rendered as "truth." For example, when Abraham's servant travels to find a wife for Isaac and is led to Rebekah, he announces, "Blessed be the LORD God of my master Abraham, who hath not left destitute my master of his mercy [*ḥesed*] and his truth [*"meth"*] (Gen 24:27 KJV). Or, as the well-known translation of Psalm 100 states, "For the LORD is good; his mercy [*ḥesed*] is everlasting; and his truth [*"mīnā*] endureth to all generations" (Ps 100:5 KJV). Given that our contemporary understandings of mercy and truth are relatively narrow, simply substituting our contemporary understandings for these words is inadequate and perhaps even misleading. Contemporary translations have done a better job of capturing both the richness of these Hebrew concepts and the intimate connections between them:

Blessed be the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness toward my master. (Gen 24:27)

For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations. (Ps 100:5)

Reliability, steadfastness, constancy, fidelity, dependability, trustworthiness. Few would doubt that these characterize God, for God truly is "a faithful God, without deceit" (Deut 32:4). When Moses receives his epiphany of God, the Lord passes before him and proclaims, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex 34:6). Here again we see the intimate connection between God's steadfast covenant love [*ḥesed*] and God's faithfulness. Indeed, this close connection echoes throughout the Old Testament (Gen 32:9; 2 Sam 2:6; 15:20; 1 Kings 3:6; Ps 25:10; 26:3; 36:5; 40:10-11; 57:10; 61:7; 85:10; 86:15; 88:11; 89; 92:2; 98:3; 100:5; 108:4; 115:1; 117:2; 138:2; Lam 3:22-23; Hos 2:19-20). This is hardly surprising, since even translations of *ḥesed* themselves—either as "steadfast love" or as "covenant love"—contain within them the notion of an abiding faithfulness.

Anyone who has read Scripture knows that the God depicted there is a God who keeps promises made. Whether it is God's dealings with Noah and his family, with Abraham and Sarah or with Moses and the children of Israel in the wilderness, throughout the pages of Scripture God is depicted again and again as a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God. In fact, many of us are so familiar with these stories that they no longer strike us as extraordinary. The God revealed in these stories is not a start-the-world-spinning-and-leave-it-to-its-own-devices sort of God; rather, this God is a God who chooses both to enter into a covenant relationship with a particular people in a specific time and place, and to be bound by that covenant forever. This is extraordinarily revealing. This God is not an aloof, abstract God. This God desires to be known through these concrete relationships: God created these people (the children of Israel) as a people, and God continues to sustain them as a people. Indeed, apart from this God, these people have no identity. Yet even more remarkably, apart from this people, this God would not have the identity that this God desires to have. This God chooses to be bound to this people and by being so bound, to reveal the mysterious depths of this God's love.

Here we glimpse another facet of God's other-directedness. Even in God's choosing of a specific people, God remains other-directed. The people of Israel are reminded that they were not chosen because they were special (Deut 7:7-9), but that they were chosen for a purpose, a mission—to be a light to the nations (Is 42:6; cf. 60:3). God does not choose to be bound to this people because it serves some need God has; on the contrary, God enters into covenant relationship with Israel as a strategy for reconciling all of creation to its creator. It is precisely through this covenant people that the nations will come to see something of the character and nature of this God that desires to be in intimate relationship with all creation.

Once we see how central this practice of being bound to others is to the very identity of this God, we need no longer draw a sharp distinction between God's love and God's faithfulness. God's faithfulness is not something added to God's love, but stands as one of the very hallmarks of God's love: God loves with a faithful, steadfast love. As noted earlier, this suggests that God's

faithfulness is not rooted in anything about us, but in God's very character. God loves this way because this is who God is. God's inability to deny God's own character is the basis for the following affirmation, words that have likely been incorporated into this pastoral letter from an early Christian hymn:

The saying is sure [*pistos*]:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;
if we endure, we will also reign with him;
if we deny him, he will also deny us;
if we are faithless, he remains faithful [*pistos*]
for he cannot deny himself (2 Tim 2:11-13)

In the pages of the New Testament this affirmation that God is faithful becomes almost formulaic. For example, Paul affirms that our calling in Christ is a direct result of God's faithfulness to us. He writes, "God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship [*koinōnia*] of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor 1:9). Likewise, John insists that our confidence in God's forgiveness is rooted in God's faithfulness: "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn 1:9).

Because hardship often tempts us to doubt God's providential care, the New Testament addresses specifically God's faithfulness in the midst of suffering and trials. In a passage already referred to in an earlier chapter, James encourages his fellow believers to see the connection between testing and maturity:

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith [*peisís*; "trust" or "faithfulness"] produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing (Jas 1:2-4; cf. 1 Cor 10:13; 1 Pet 4:19).

Our God is a faithful God, and even though those who are emissaries of this God are likewise called to be faithful, Scripture consistently testifies to our habitual unfaithfulness. Our ancestors in the faith are identified as a

"stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God" (Ps 78:8). Like Israel, our unfaithfulness often stems from our lack of faith or trust in God. The wilderness experience of Israel is a stark reminder of how easily we doubt God's providential care, even in the face of powerful testimony to God's faithfulness. The entire third chapter of the book of Hebrews contrasts the unfaithfulness of those who were disobedient to God in the wilderness with the faithfulness of Christ. Scripture is replete with stories of people who, rather than trust in God's ways, determined to take matters into their own hands, often with disastrous consequences. Too often we follow directly in their footsteps, reaping similar results.

Over and over again God's prophets ring out stinging rebukes of Israel's unfaithfulness (cf. Jer 5). Indeed, these rebukes can be read as a reminder that God refuses to give up on those to whom God is bound. We see this most poignantly in what is perhaps the most moving prophetic enactment in all of Scripture: God's command to Hosea to marry the prostitute Gomer. God instructs Hosea to bind himself to Gomer as a visual, embodied reminder of the way God has chosen to be bound to God's people despite their unfaithfulness. Despite Gomer's past and despite her future unfaithfulness, Hosea is called to bear with her just as God bears with Israel. As Paul reminds the Romans, our unfaithfulness cannot provoke God to unfaithfulness:

What if some were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means! Although everyone is a liar, let God be proved true. (Rom 3:3-4)

Even God's judgment of Israel is an example of God's other-directed love, a point not lost on Paul in his discussion of Israel's future (Rom 9-11). Rather than understanding God's judgment as a vengeful act of an impatient God, Paul insists that God's treatment of Israel is other-directed in two important ways. First, Israel's rejection of Jesus has led Israel to stumble, but this stumbling has provided a providential opportunity for God's other-directed love to reach the Gentiles, who are to be grafted into Israel. Second, this spurning of Israel is intended for its ultimate good, as a way of provoking

Israel to jealousy and thus drawing Israel back to God. Hence, even in Israel's "rejection," God's other-directed love is working for Israel's ultimate good and thus is no final rejection at all.

As disciples and servants of the Faithful One, we are called to be faithful. Several times in the New Testament we are reminded that stewards are called to be faithful or trustworthy with that which they have been entrusted. In Jesus' parable of the talents the first two servants are commended for being good (*agathē*) and faithful (*pistos*) slaves (Mt 25:21-23; cf. Lk 19:17). It is perhaps with this parable in mind that Paul tells the Corinthians, "Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy (*pistos*)" (1 Cor 4:1-2). Indeed, faithfulness is so central to the character of the Christian that when Paul comments to his hearers a fellow Christian, he routinely describes them simply as "faithful" (1 Cor 4:17; Eph 6:21; Col 1:7; 4:9).

Obstacles to a Life of Faithfulness

In stark contrast to the faithfulness and reliability of God, we live and move within a dominant culture increasingly characterized by rapid change and instability. Although every age must grapple with the challenges evoked by change, the sheer scope and pace of change in most Western cultures over the last one hundred years has been unprecedented. Hence, if we desire to cooperate with God's desire to cultivate faithfulness in our lives, we will have to do so in the midst of a culture that traffics in the impermanent and the fleeting.

Nurturing ephemerality and disposability. In an earlier chapter I argued that contemporary practices of advertising, aligned as they are with the drive toward novelty, cultivate within us a paradoxical "loyalty" to the transitory and fleeting. We are, in short, encouraged to be deeply committed to being uncommitted. Although most of us learned at an early age that, contrary to popular belief, the grass is *not* always greener on the other side, our lives continue to embody this sentiment in countless ways. Rather than sticking with anything for any length of time—whether it be spouses, jobs, friends, churches or hobbies—we tend to flit from one thing to the next in search of

that missing "something." As a result, convictions and practices of faithfulness and commitment rarely get the chance to sprout, let alone thrive.

One of the telling features of the dominant culture and one that tends to choke out convictions regarding commitment and faithfulness is the value placed on disposability. We have disposable plates, napkins, eating utensils, packaging, razors, diapers, contact lenses and cameras. Indeed, almost every week a new product comes on the market whose primary "virtue" (read "selling point") is its disposability. For a throwaway culture the obvious advantage of disposables is that such products require no upkeep. Rather than service those things that serve us, we create products that we can simply discard. We euphemistically tell ourselves that we buy and use these products for their convenience; what we mean is that these products require nothing of us. They do not need to be washed, sterilized, cleaned or repaired. They are designed so that their usefulness will be so short-lived that it will be easier to throw them away than to service them. What, after all, would be the point of washing paper plates or diapers, since the whole point of using them is to avoid doing this in the first place?

But the disposable mentality is not limited to merely those items that are created and marketed as disposable; it also extends to countless other items whose obsolescence (planned or otherwise) encourages us to dispose of them rather than service them. For example, Kim and I were once shopping for an inexpensive cassette tape player for one of our children's birthdays. Much to our surprise we found one for around ten dollars. When this tape player stops functioning in two or three years, as it most certainly will, are we really going to take it somewhere to have it fixed, knowing that parts are likely not available and that a technician's fees are around \$35 per hour? Why not just trash this one and get another? I hate throwing things into the local landfill, but what choice do I have? Or take another common example. Even as I write, our family is trying to decide what to do with a computer for which we paid \$3,000 several years ago, but which now needs over \$500 worth of repairs to it, even though the computer is now only worth about \$200 on the open market. How often do we find ourselves making this kind of choice, a choice between the old, out-dated and now expensive-to-keep-up item and the new,

up-to-date and seemingly more cost-effective product? Don't most of us feel like fools when we find ourselves explaining that we are currently putting more into something than it is ostensibly worth?

Within such a culture should we really be surprised if we find it easier and easier to "dispose" of relationships once they too have outlived their usefulness? Employers now speak of "disposable workforces" that consist of part-time employees with low wages and no benefits. Such workforces command no loyalty from their employers; employees are simply dismissed when they are no longer needed. Couples decide to live with each other and "keep their options open" rather than make what they consider to be unrealistic promises. Each mistakenly assumes that they have the best of both worlds: all the benefits of an intimate relationship without any of the risks and liabilities of long-term entanglements.

How does functioning within a "disposable" culture affect the church? Not a few Christians have a tendency to jump ship when the going gets tough at a particular congregation. If they try to change things, try to move the church along, and it doesn't happen, they're tempted to pack their bags and go elsewhere. Such a practice seems to reflect a level of commitment no deeper than the average consumer's commitment to a given product, once dissatisfied, the search is on for something better, where what is "better" is typically determined by what will best meet one's perceived needs. This easy willingness to "move on" also rests on the assumption that congregations and their constitutive relationships are fully interchangeable. Although there is something positive about knowing that we belong to a worldwide community of brothers and sisters in Christ, we perhaps do more damage than we know to the body of Christ by appealing to the catholicity of the church in order to avoid committing ourselves to any specific group of Christians.

Shunning commitments. This last example suggests that a "disposable" culture might dispose us to avoid making commitments in the first place. That is, in a culture marked by evanescence, where everything appears to be changing rapidly, it makes no sense to limit your options by committing yourself to any one person, group of persons, or even course of action. Surely everyone knows that making commitments, promises and covenants in an

environment of constant change and mobility is a sure recipe for heartache and disappointment. Why bother?

Such sentiments, although understandable, remind us of how reverently our culture continues to worship at the altar of the individual. Within the cult of the individual there simply are no satisfactory answers to questions such as: Why should I keep my promises? Or (more to the point) why should I even *make* promises? If what is most important is the individual and the individual's desire to remain as unconstrained as possible, then making—let alone keeping—promises appears to be an ill-advised, if not ridiculous, practice. And in a culture as mobile as ours, such practices make even less sense. Why bind yourself to other people when neither you nor they know whether six months from now you will even be around to follow through?

In an odd kind of way this reticence to make commitments may reflect a lingering sense of their importance. Even people who haven't thought about it very hard realize that promises bind us to other people. Hence, one strategy for avoiding being so bound (and therefore, so limited) is to shun commitments altogether. Why promise Kim that I will be home from work this afternoon at four o'clock, knowing full well that in so doing I both create certain expectations for her and limit my own options? Why tell the children that we will play baseball after dinner this evening, when doing so will raise expectations on their part and thereby discourage me from changing my mind and doing what I want to do after dinner? Why tell my Sunday-school class that I am available to help with a service project next weekend when in so doing I limit my options for next weekend? Why not simply tell Kim that I will be there when I get there, put the children off by telling them "we'll see," and keep my options open for next weekend by saying that "You'd better not count on me because I think we already have other plans"?

"You'd better not count on me." This serves as the unofficial motto of many people in our society. Although on the surface these words appear to be a safeguard against disappointing other people, in truth they are more often employed to safeguard our own independence and autonomy. The consequences for the cultivation of faithfulness are profound: many of us don't have to learn what is involved in remaining faithful because we have insured that

no one is counting on us. Predictably many of these same people experience profound loneliness, cut off as they are from the intimacy created by being bound to other people through webs of promises and commitments. Such intimacy remains impossible as long as the only person I am committed to is myself.

Learning the proper objects of our loyalty. So far, the discussion has been limited to those ways in which the dominant culture discourages faithfulness. But it would be misleading to stop there, for this is only part of the problem. The balance concerns how the dominant culture disciplines us to be faithful or loyal to certain things in certain ways. Thus we need to inquire briefly about the objects of our faithfulness.

As suggested above, strong currents in our culture would encourage us to be faithful or true to ourselves. Typically, however, such faithfulness extends no further than loyalty to our own admittedly fickle feelings and moods. We see this best, perhaps, in the ways we have cultivated a deep aversion to doing anything out of obligation, telling ourselves in the process that it is more "authentic" or "honest" to do nothing at all than to do something "merely" from obligation. So if one doesn't feel like visiting one's grandparent in the nursing home this weekend, better to stay home and keep one's integrity and authenticity intact than visit out of obligation.

If the dominant culture teaches us to be true to ourselves, it also encourages us to be loyal to a few other people, as long as such loyalty is understood (and expressed) in specific ways. Employees are often expected to prove their loyalty to the company by doing things they might prefer not to do. Most of us know people, for example, who are routinely expected to lie for their bosses ("Oh, he's out of the office right now"), manipulate data for the benefit of their company, or tell their superiors only what they want to hear. Such, we are told, is what it means to be a loyal employee. In similar ways, friends (and spouses) often make unspoken agreements to tell each other less than the truth, believing that in doing so they are demonstrating their loyalty. As a result, being a person's friend often entails little more than tacitly agreeing to affirm them in whatever they determine to do. In contrast, admonishing one's friends, or calling their attention to possible self-deceptions, or encouraging

them to be more than they currently are, are widely regarded as actions unbecoming of a true friend.

Finally, there are also ways in which we are encouraged to be "true to us," meaning, to our country. Most citizens of this nation would readily acknowledge that they owe a significant measure of allegiance and loyalty to the United States. But is this faithfulness to one's country total and unconditional, in the same way in which we are called to be faithful to God? What happens when this loyalty calls us (or those acting on our behalf) to die or to kill in the name of the nation-state and that for which it stands ("freedom"? Surely Christians, who are called to love their enemies, should at least be willing to discuss such difficult questions with each other, even if they must admit that easy answers to these questions are unavailable.

Cultivating Faithfulness

If God is to cultivate faithfulness in our lives, Christians will need to focus on those resources God has provided us for so doing. What kind of resources can the people of God draw on as they seek to reflect more fully God's abiding faithfulness in the midst of cultures like ours?

Celebrating God's abiding presence. If we begin again by reflecting on worship, we are quickly reminded that one of the church's deepest convictions is that God is present when we gather. We rightly spend little or no time wondering whether God is present when we worship because we have been promised that God would be so present. It would be easy to miss this obvious point because we so easily take for granted God's faithful presence. Yet the simple act of gathering itself is both an opportunity for God to make good on that promise to meet us in the gathered community and an opportunity for us to celebrate God's faithful presence.

Yet we do not simply gather. We gather to immerse ourselves again, by various means, in the stories of God and God's people, a major theme of which is God's remarkable faithfulness. As noted earlier in this chapter, Scripture testifies abundantly to God's faithfulness, so when we gather to hear this story again we will inevitably be reminded that we serve a God who is faithful and who calls us to be faithful as well. We are called to be disciples

of the one whom the book of Revelation calls "the faithful witness" (Rev 1:5). It is worth noting that the Greek word translated here as "witness" (*martyr*) is the same word from which we derive our English word *martyr*. The history of the church is filled with stories of people who, by God's grace, were such faithful witnesses, often to the point of death (cf. Rev 2:10). Although most of us will never be called to physical martyrdom, the witness of those who have been called stands as a powerful reminder that faithful discipleship is always costly discipleship.

Yet the church must not only tell the stories of those who have remained faithful, it must also tell the stories of those who have not. The church has nothing to gain by papering over its checkered past and present; indeed, the promise that God remains faithful even in our unfaithfulness would be unnecessary if we could assure God of our faithfulness. But God's grace triumphs in our failures as well, and though we in no way desire or court failure in order that God's grace may abound (Rom 6:1), we realize that we will never be found completely faithful until God's work has been completed in us. Short of that, we continue to stand in awe of God's unrelenting faithfulness, a faithfulness that refuses to let us go until God's perfect work has been brought to completion.

Making and keeping promises. Christians have reasons for making and keeping promises that other people may not have. We make such promises because we worship a promise-making and promise-keeping God who has called us to do the same as a witness, even if an imperfect one, to God's own faithfulness. Thus like God, we choose not to be known apart from the relationships we have entered by means of covenants and promises.

Marriage is one of the few practices left in our culture where we make public promises, and perhaps the recent decline in people getting married says as much about our unwillingness to make promises as it does our confusion about marriage. In the midst of this confusion about the purpose of marriage, Christian marriage stands as one of the central practices of the church and one of its most important resources when it comes to embodying faithfulness. Although Christian marriage is many things, when rightly understood it functions as a vital and visible embodiment and reminder of God's faithful-

ness. By making lifelong vows to each other the couple entering Christian marriage makes public promises that they themselves lack the resources to keep. This is certainly part of the risk of Christian marriage: only if God is faithful do they have any hope of having their union serve as a reflection of God's faithfulness. I can still remember being deeply moved during our wedding ceremony when the entire congregation belloved out all the verses to "Great Is Thy Faithfulness." Kim and I were rightly convinced that our relationship to that point had been nurtured and sustained by God's faithfulness; we also knew we could only expect to fulfill our marriage vows, "till death do us part," by the continual and faithful outpouring of God's grace.

The longer I am married, the more clearly I see the ways I remain unfaithful to Kim. For too long my unfaithfulness remained cloaked by our culture's tendency to equate "being unfaithful" with "having an affair." In ways reminiscent of the last chapter, we too easily define faithfulness negatively; that is, I am considered a faithful husband if I am not sexually active with anyone other than my wife. But for Christians who have been called to embody in their own relationships a reflection of God's other-directedness, faithfulness and unfaithfulness cannot be reduced to matters of sexuality. When I stood before God and the church and made my vows, I promised to do a good deal more than not sleep around. For starters, I pledged to love and cherish her. Like most lifelong commitments, we grow into them, and I must admit that after many years of marriage, I am only now beginning to understand what loving and cherishing Kim entails. One matter is clear, however: loving and cherishing Kim entails being much less self-absorbed and much more other-directed than I am generally inclined to be. Being married to Kim calls me to transformation. Contrary to much popular opinion, making promises does not simply limit one's options: it also opens up new possibilities. By agreeing to have my life inextricably bound to Kim's, I opened myself up to the transforming power of God's grace that is at work in and through that intimate relationship called marriage.

Of course, marriage is not the only way in which we bind ourselves to other people, nor is marriage the only kind of intimate relationship through which we might be transformed. Whether we are married or unmarried—and both

are fully legitimate options for Christians—all of us know how impoverished our lives would be without those whom we call friends. Though our society offers a rather anemic and pitiful notion of friendship, a more robust practice of friendship both assumes and underscores the importance of faithfulness. This is perhaps seen most clearly in the close relationship between friendship, faithfulness and truth-telling.

Telling the truth. Faithful friendships and marriages have at least one thing in common: they are sustained and nourished by a vision that encompasses more than simply maintaining that relationship. Never satisfied simply to maintain the status quo, our faithful friends and partners always call us to be more than we currently are. Their love, of course, is not contingent on our being or becoming more; on the contrary, their longing for us to be more is itself a mark of the abiding love they already have for us.

For Christians the vision of "more" that compels us is the person of Jesus Christ, into whose image we are being daily transformed. Christians believe that they are called to be conformed to the image of Christ, and yet they also know that they are not yet so conformed. This double recognition serves as a constant reminder of a profound and life-ordering truth: we are not yet what we will be.

Because this truth stands at the heart of the Christian faith, we are granted a remarkable measure of freedom to speak the truth in love to one another. Such truth-telling, when engaged in out of love, stands as a profound act of faithfulness. If each of us knows that we are not yet what we will be, yet we continue to desire to be what we will be (and desire this for others as well), then we are free to help each other recognize those areas of our lives where we continue to fall short. Obviously, such discernments must be made with great sensitivity and humility, because none of us can presume to speak definitively for God. Nevertheless, part of what the crucible of Christian friendship requires is the courage to help each other discern where and how we continue to fall short of God's desires for us. To do this, we need to be able to tell each other the truth.

If learning to tell the truth to one another can be understood as a way of cultivating and embodying faithfulness, we should also realize that faithfulness helps to make truth-telling possible. Friends are free to tell each other

the truth because they don't have to worry whether such truth-telling will shatter a fragile and unstable relationship. All of us have probably been in relationships where we felt as if we were walking on the proverbial eggshells, always fearful that if we spoke too truthfully the relationship would be over. Friends or partners who have not pledged lifelong fidelity to one another often find it more difficult to tell each other the truth. It often seems much safer to perpetuate a lie than to try to tell the other person the truth and risk sending them packing. In contrast, I would like to think that Kim has the freedom to tell me the truth about myself—regardless of how painful it may be or how much I may want to deny it—because she doesn't have to wonder whether I'll still be there in the morning. By pledging to remain faithful to one another, regardless of the circumstances, we help create and sustain conditions conducive to truth-telling.

God in Christ has told us the truth about ourselves: we are not yet what we will be. Because Christians take this as a given, we are free to bind ourselves to each other in Christian friendship and marriage for our mutual good, as crucibles in which our transformation might be aided. By so binding ourselves to each other, we make possible further acts of faithfulness, not least of which is telling each other the truth.

Reflection Questions and Practical Suggestions

- Reflect on the ways in which the impermanence fostered by the dominant culture impacts you most directly. Where in your life, for example, do you most experience the impact of rapid change and mobility? Where do you sense that the culture in which you are immersed most threatens the cultivation of faithfulness? Are there ways in which that culture encourages the cultivation of faithfulness? If so, how is such faithfulness understood, and to what or to whom is such faithfulness directed?
- List specific examples from your own experience of how the dominant culture has encouraged you to view other people and your relationships with them as disposable. Can you think of times in your life when you were led to feel as if *you* were disposable? Can you think of times when you likely led others to feel this way?

A “disposable” culture encourages us to view most everything (and perhaps most everyone) from the point of view of our own convenience. If I am not even willing to wash a plate or a napkin for you because it’s “too much trouble,” what reason would you have for thinking that I would ever be willing to be “troubled” or “inconvenienced” by you? Although there are good creation-care arguments that would rightly urge us to avoid using disposable products whenever possible, we might also choose to avoid them because of the subtle ways in which a “use-without-servicing” mentality may have on other areas of our lives.

- Make a list of all the people to whom you have made promises or commitments in the last few months. Make another list of those people on whom you believe you could rely to be there for you regardless of the circumstances. In light of these lists consider your own willingness to have your life bound to the lives of other people. Have you ever found yourself hesitant to commit yourself to other people lest your life become entangled with theirs? Have you ever urged others not to count on you as a way of “keeping your own options open”? Consider what your life would be like and who you would be if the people on your two lists were not involved in your life or you in theirs.

It is important to acknowledge that people have lots of different reasons for avoiding commitments. Some people, for example, have suffered horrible abuse in the past and find it difficult even to imagine a future, let alone commit to it. Such persons cannot simply be cajoled into being committed; instead, they need people who are willing to draw near to them, developing relationships of trust with them in order to make it possible for them, over time, to begin imagining a future that would include trusting other people.

- Devote some time to reflecting on your relationships, both past and present, that you believe were and are marked by faithfulness. To what extent are those relationships also marked by the willingness to tell each other the truth? Can you think of specific examples from your own life of the connection between faithfulness and truth-telling?
- If you have not done so already, seriously consider committing yourself to a congregation of believers for the long haul. As long as you believe the Spirit

is still present there, covenant to stay and remain faithful, speaking (and receiving) the truth in love. There will, of course, be tremendous pressure to view your choice of congregation as little more than a consumer choice. Do your best to leave open the possibility that God might be able to use you—and transform you—in a particular place despite your being less than satisfied with your experience there. It may be that many of us are modern-day Jonahs who, in the name of our own needs and desires, run away from the very challenges God has placed before us. If we find ourselves frustrated with the lack of reform or vision of our local congregations, why should we think that leaving would help that congregation? Or is it only that leaving will likely help us? It seems conceivable that God might use us to help bring the very reform we rightly desire and in the process transform us as well.

□ This raises another issue that warrants further exploration: the matter of mobility. Our society continues to be one of the most mobile in the entire world, and although we did not directly address in this chapter the threat mobility poses to faithfulness, it requires little imagination to see how this might be the case. For example, have you ever found yourself pulling back from developing deeper friendships with those in your parish or congregation because you were unsure, given the mobility of people in our culture, about the future of such relationships? Because many people don't know whether they will be around six months from now, there seems to be a certain disincentive to devoting time and energy to developing relationships whose termination will bring heartache and loss. Yet surely our fellowships should not be marked by such self-protective strategies. Christians who have placed their lives in the hands of a faithful God can risk becoming involved in other people's lives without calculating whether the potential benefits of those relationships outweigh their potential for heartache.

□ Christians in this society are in desperate need of fresh ways of thinking about conflicting loyalties and allegiances. Often we are taught to think of the problem of conflicting loyalties as a problem of something called "priorities." If we just get our priorities straight, we are told, everything else will fall into place. On the purely formal or abstract level I have no disagreements with such advice. My worry, however, comes when people assume that such

advice offers us useful guidance in discerning how we should order our lives and make decisions. Such advice too easily implies that simply knowing how to order one's priorities on a piece of paper is equivalent to knowing how to order one's life. Put bluntly, what most Christians need is not to be convinced that God needs to be "Number One" but to be helped to see what "seeking first God's kingdom" might actually look like in terms of how we live day to day. What does my commitment to remain faithful to God and God's kingdom mean for my commitments to my family, friends, neighbors, fellow workers and country? Obviously there is no way to answer that question in the abstract, for the way it is answered will have everything to do with the specific conflict that arises in a particular context. Yet the reality of such particularity also suggests that these conflicts cannot be made to disappear by simply asserting that all we need to do is get our priorities straight. Just as Kim would not likely be impressed if I simply told her, day after day, that she was "the most important person in my life," while little or nothing in my life gave any credence to such a claim, so God is not likely impressed by simply occupying the first position on our master list of priorities. Being faithful to God entails more than that, yet seeing precisely what it might entail in this or that situation will require a willingness on our part to be drawn into difficult and sometimes agonizing discussions with one another about how best to sort through these conflicting commitments that make us who we are.

□ Toward that end our imaginations might be fruitfully enriched were we to immerse ourselves, as well as our children, in the stories of faithful Christians across the ages. This is particularly important because discerning what faithfulness requires in a given situation often demands seeing options that are not immediately evident. Retelling stories about the lives of faithful Christians can often open up our limited imaginations to see new possibilities as we come to see what faithfulness has demanded in other times and places. Equally important, the stories of these faithful Christians remind us of God's faithfulness, something we can all too easily lose sight of in the midst of our everyday worries and struggles.

□ Finally, we should also seek to be attentive to the exemplars of faithfulness that God has placed in our immediate context. Because faithfulness is usually

quiet rather than ostentatious, exemplars of faithfulness may be right in front of our eyes, yet remain largely invisible to us. This has, I fear, been one of the unfortunate (and undoubtedly unwriting) consequences of the Promise Keepers movement. By calling men away from their homes and family obligations for weekend gatherings where the virtues of promise keeping could be trumpeted, this movement may have blinded some men to the quiet, less self-congratulatory exemplars of faithfulness in their own homes. What some men most need is not another man who can help them keep their promises but to learn that the best exemplar of faithfulness may be their own wives. Can we imagine a million women heading off for the weekend to declare their commitment to promise keeping while their husbands stayed home with the children? If not, does this tell us anything important about faithfulness? Is it possible that many women are too busy *being* faithful in innumerable and gentle ways to see the need to hold a pep rally about it? Perhaps not a few Christian men would benefit from paying attention to such exemplars in their very midst.

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely, and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. (1 Thess 5:23-24)

NINE

Cultivating Gentleness in the Midst of Aggression

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sortliness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. (Jas 1:19-21)

If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another. My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. (Gal 5:25-6:1)

F*ootball stadiums. Saturday morning cartoons. Workplace. Music videos. Toy stores. Movie theaters. Living rooms and kitchens. Computer games. School classrooms. Novels. Friday night dates. Network news programs.*

What do all these have in common? At least one thing: they are all primary venues for the staggering amount of violence—both real and fictional—that permeates our lives. Even if one argues that fictional violence merely reflects the violent society in which we live, one has to admit that such portrayals do little to offer other options for resolving conflict. Perhaps this is one reason why the following statistics suggest a problem of epidemic proportions:

□ The Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that one million people die each year in this country as a direct result of violence. Researchers