

There has been much talk of late about stewardship and generosity. As a result, I've had a lot of time to think about the terms, their meaning and the role they play in our lives. I've also found myself wondering what drives the actions associated with stewardship and generosity, what sits behind them?

Two words continue to come to mind; loyalty and faithfulness. At the risk of being accused of intellectualizing, I want to ruminate, cogitate, elucidate, and elaborate on these words and ideas.

Loyalty, faithfulness: big words. At first glance, I think we know instinctively, we're dealing with something weighty, something of substance, something with significant implications. When I stopped to think about the words, I knew I knew what the words meant, I had used them before; they were familiar. Yet, upon close consideration—"so what *do* these words mean?"—I was somewhat surprised, an answer did not come quickly to mind.

I found myself putting the words together, laying them side-by-side, placing them on the floor of my mind, looking at them, sizing them up. Are they the same? Are they different? It made sense that they should be side by side, they work well together.

Do I know one better than the other? What's my relationship with these words? Is there a feeling I get when I think about them? Do they pull me in, am I attracted to them or do I keep them at arms length, not let them in too close?"

What was *your* first reaction? Do you have an easy, quick definition, a clear picture of what these words mean? Do the words make you comfortable? Are you pulled in by them? Do you find affinity with these words, or do you, like me, find them a little too hot to cozy up to?

Both words imply fidelity, long term commitment, constancy. That's not a quick and easy step for me. I'm inclined to take these words slowly, and carefully.

I had a foggy notion of what the words meant, but I wanted better clarity. Viscerally, I kept being pulled back to the importance of the words' meaning. I felt that if I lost a sense of that bigness, I would miss something significant.

Loyalty. What do we know about loyalty? It's a positive attribute, a plus, it's held as a cultural value. In fact, it's been held as a human value throughout history.

Elsa, my long gone favorite dog was loyal, now *that* was loyalty. You know the story: the licks, the tail wagging, 100% of her attention focused just on you! The unequivocal joy and excitement at your arrival -- seemingly always, no matter when you arrive, no matter your mood. Where else could one get such positive regard? Who else could possibly enjoy my company so much they would want to be with me wherever I went? And if I didn't take her along, she'd still greet me warmly upon my return? So Elsa was loyal, in a *constant* and *predictable* way...these words seem to go with loyalty.

Then there is loyalty to a sovereign, the State, the government. I suspect this is where the first usage of the word came into play. Kings provided land and protection for loyal subjects. Notoriety, respect and the spoils of war were given to those who helped protect and expand the kingdom.

Today, we pledge our allegiance not to Caesar but to the flag, as a way of showing our loyalty to our country. We vote the party line out of loyalty to our inherited or adopted political party. We join the military, go to war and sometimes die for the loyalty we have to our government and what it represents. AND in protest, we might consider withholding paying taxes to the government, out of loyalty to what WE believe our government stands for.

We write and sign petitions. We hold vigils and march in protest, out of loyalty to what we believe our government *should* stand for. And sometimes, we come face to face with others, who deeply hold loyalties, diametrically opposed to ours.

Loyalty is something of significance, something powerful. It drives us to action, even sometimes, to death. Socrates was loyal to seeking the truth and to the laws of Athens, loyal unto death. He came up against a set of countervailing loyalties held so deeply, that the society was willing to put a man to death in order to enforce them.

Before he was jailed, I don't know if Socrates knew just how deeply loyal he was to the search for truth. Before the trial, I don't know if the jurors knew just how loyal *they* were to *their* established "truths".

It seems, sometimes our loyalties sneak up on us. In a moment's time, a loyalty can be revealed. I know it's happened to me. I find myself in a heated discussion, a debate, a confrontation in words. A loyalty is being revealed; a loyalty to a thought, a belief, position, conclusion, a truth. Often, I hadn't known in advance just how invested I was in that particular belief or position. So our loyalties, it seems, are revealed by our behavior, by our actions.

Sometimes our loyalty drives us to good deeds; sometimes the opposite. Its admirable when one stands up for a friend to protect or defend them. Or when we go to another in their time of need, even though it's horribly inconvenient. It's not so admirable when one fails to tell a friend the truth, in order to "keep from hurting them".

To what or whom are we loyal? How loyal are we? Do we have fair weather loyalties, to be abandoned during stormy seas? Do we have loyalties we don't even know we have? Do we have loyalties that we hold *so deeply*, we are willing to die for them?

Loyalties exist as feeling tones, perhaps based on conscious allegiances and commitments, but they manifest on the emotional plane. Others know our loyalties by our behavior. Loyalties, however one might define them, move us, drive us to action. We should pick our loyalties carefully, for we can never know where they may lead.

Turning our attention to faithfulness, do you have a sense of the word? Is it the same or different from loyalty? I suspect it is different. I come back to my dog Elsa. How did I know she was loyal, that I had her loyalty? It was in her everyday behavior.

She left no room for me to conclude otherwise. Her constant attempt to be with me everywhere I went showed her loyalty. Her licks and tail wagging, her excitement at my arrival, all taken together, allowed me to feel her loyalty.

There is something about faithfulness that resides in repeated behavior. The idea or concept of faithfulness lacks the substance of which faithfulness is made. This sentiment seems to be implied in a quote from the Buddha: "Health is the greatest gift, contentment the greatest wealth, faithfulness the best relationship".

Relationships are interactive, and here I stress the active part of the word. They are about how you treat someone else; what you do for them, with them, to them, because of them. Certainly, relationships are built on feelings, but those feelings must be shared, communicated to another so that they are known. There is something unique and special about a faithful friend. The bible tells us "a faithful friend is a strong defense; and he that hath found one hath found a treasure".

Faithfulness is about behaviors, a demonstration reflecting something else. It's a way we know someone, a way we come to recognize a relationship a person has with someone or something else. Faithfulness is not always about highfaluting things. Sometimes we are faithful to the mundane.

We all, I suspect, know at least one person who is grumpy. We know they are grumpy by their behavior, an attitude expressed in words and deeds. Grumpy people can consistently be counted on to act like grumps! They seem to faithfully manifest those particular behavior traits that tell us, this is a grumpy person.

We can be faithful to a personality trait or a way of being in the world. I'm faithful to my internal clock, for good or ill. I can faithfully be counted on to never arrive too early for anything. I hate waiting around. Perhaps this faithfulness is simple loyalty to my internal time clock. Perhaps it is something much more complicated. Perhaps its blind faithfulness or misplaced faithfulness, but it is fairly consistent behavior. Consistent behavior is a way we recognize faithfulness.

We are all faithful to something or someone, whether or not we recognize it as such. Faithfulness is the way we show loyalty. It happens in the broad strokes of the way we live our lives, and it happens in the moment-to-moment decisions we make.

It happens out of conscious choices we make, but more often, it seems, it happens almost automatically without forethought. I'm not sure we can will ourselves into faithfulness. It seems to me, faithfulness, genuine faithfulness, comes from someplace other than will, somewhere other than conscious intent. I suspect faithfulness is a by-product, perhaps of loyalty.

It seems to emanate from somewhere inside us. We are told in the bible: "do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you, bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart".

We are being told that these things are or should be important to us. Bind them around your neck; do not leave home without them! They are not just the spice of life, but something much more central, foundational. We are being told that loyalty and faithfulness rightly lives on the tablet of your heart.

It's not a rational process but comes from the depths of our being. It lives in a place that has the ability to sustain us through the dark days and nights that we will inevitably need to endure. Let us not be mindless about something so important. Let us be conscious about how we employ our loyalty and faithfulness.

This is why stewardship asks us to deeply consider, to think about, feel and experience our relationship to this Fellowship. This is why stewardship asks us to consider whether our time, talent and resources match our beliefs about what we value about this congregation?

Regardless of where one comes down on the issue of a relationship with a congregation, it's important that we use our loyalty and faithfulness in a way that supports the best in each of us. Let us use our faithfulness to minister to ourselves and to others. Let us turn our loyalties and faithfulness loose, and with the eagerness of a puppy, engage this world we live in.

May it be, amen.