

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. I'm gonna start with a **Tale of Two Podcasts**. I'm a podcast fan, and I'm gonna relate a couple of instances from two different ones I've heard recently.
- B. The first comes from the Brave New World of Kids podcasts, which our family has recently discovered. And one of my kids' favorites is a podcast called "**Pickle**". The name doesn't refer to preserved vegetables; it's an ethics podcast for kids in which they consider various situations where we find ourselves "In a Pickle".
 1. One of the recent episodes has to do with **telling on someone**. There are lots of names for it: tattling, snitching, ratting, in Australia, it's apparently called dobbing. And in this episode they explore, when, if ever, should you tell on someone? And it can be a complicated question. In the episode they give various scenarios: your friend is climbing the high ropes in the gym at school unsupervised and without a mat, against the rules, or someone in your class is using their cell phone against class policy. Should you tell? What if the person violating a rule isn't just a casual friend, but your best friend? Or your brother or sister? Does it matter if their behavior is simply breaking a rule, or putting themselves or someone else in danger? And how does telling or not telling affect your relationship with the person in question? **And in the podcast, they take these questions to a number of kids who respond to them with different points of view.** My own kids' opinions mirror this diversity of perspective as well. **Some kids are more inclined to be strict rule followers: rules are rules.** If you broke the rule I should tell, even if it's hard, and there should be a consequence. Other kids think it **depends on various circumstances**. And other kids are more clear on a different option: **If you tell on a friend, even if they did something pretty bad, it's a betrayal.**
- C. The **second podcast moment comes from This American Life**. They recently did an episode I highly recommend, called "**Five Women**". It's a different kind of #metoo story, in which a journalist is following up on one of these stories about multiple sexual harassment allegations against a prominent person in power, in this case Don Hazen, the editor of Alternet, by diving deeper into the histories of each of the women, and trying to get a sense of how the harassment in question fit within their own breadth of experience with men. Where did this fit in their own self-understandings of their sexuality, and its impact in the workplace? But one of these stories was different than the others.
 1. Four of the women work for Don and told stories of various kinds. Sometimes it was unwanted sexual advances from their supervisor. In one case, it was a workplace flirtation that turned into a full-blown multi-year affair. You get a sense hearing their stories that it's important and empowering for these women to be able to tell them, to bring these various incidents to light, that this moment we're in, with its recognition of these various kinds of interactions as problematic, is healing, empowering, and fundamentally necessary for a change in culture that needs to follow.
 2. And then there was the story of Vivian who has a different experience. As much as she supports the #metoo movement, for her this is personal in a different way. Vivian has been Don's partner of 23 years, she just recently found out as the BuzzFeed article breaking the news on him was coming out, that her partner of over two decades hadn't just flirted with women, hadn't just occasionally missed their cues and been a little too handsy, but that he had had a multi-year affair over a decade before that she had never known about.
 3. You get the sense in hearing her, that as embarrassing and costly as Don's public downfall has been, this news about his affair is the most personally difficult and disorienting. This is the deepest betrayal. She struggles to make sense of it in the narrative she had of their life. She struggles to figure out what it means for her place in his heart. In her words:

a) *I want to know about stupid things like, did they share the music that we love? You know, things like that, things that have always felt very special and intimate. I want to know what was shared that's always felt exclusive.*

We were watching a movie the other night, and one character was holding another in a certain way. And I just broke down, and just said, did you hold her that way? He said, no, when I saw that, I just thought, that's you and me. And I believe him.

D. Both of these two podcast moments in different ways relate to questions of faithfulness, in relationships. They both relate to the **characteristic of fidelity**, as well as its nemesis, betrayal. **What is fidelity?** It's kind of a word that's fallen out of fashion these days, but the dictionary definition says it means something like **"faithfulness to a person, cause, or belief, demonstrated by continuing loyalty and support"**.

E. This is our final teaching in a series called "Character Matters"

1. Discussing the importance of considering personal character in a culture and moment when maybe folks think it's not a thing we should spend too much thought on. But rather than simply being a means of rigid behavior control, how might considering character be helpful to us in living a life that brings freedom, life, and even connection with others and God?
2. We've talked about honesty, generosity, and today I want to focus on this talk on this idea of **fidelity**. As my examples I hope remind us, questions of relational faithfulness, of course impact our intimate partnerships. But **fidelity isn't just about those**. I'd like to suggest that fidelity and betrayal are relevant to all significant relationships. They're relevant to our friendships. Relevant to our connections to family. To our parenting. They're relevant to our connection with God.
3. **Jesus was never married, but he understood what it meant to be faithful in relationships, and to be unfaithful.** Faithfulness and unfaithfulness impacted him greatly.
4. Today, we're going to take a look at a few parts of a story that comes towards the end of the life of Jesus, and in these passages we're going to see what I think are a number of moments that demonstrate **ways we can be impacted in our relationships by fidelity, as well as betrayal**. These parts of the story come from Jesus' last week in Jerusalem: what we're getting ready to acknowledge in about a week: Holy Week.

II. The Story

A. Part 1:

Two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the chief priests and the experts in the law were trying to find a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. 2 For they said, "Not during the feast, so there won't be a riot among the people."

3 Now while Jesus was in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, reclining at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of costly aromatic oil from pure nard. After breaking open the jar, she poured it on his head. 4 But some who were present indignantly said to one another, "Why this waste of expensive ointment? 5 It could have been sold for more than three hundred silver coins and the money given to the poor!" So they spoke angrily to her. 6 But Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why are you bothering her? She has done a good service for me. 7 For you will always have the poor with you, and you can do good for them whenever you want. But you will not always have me! 8 She did what she could. She anointed my body beforehand for burial. 9 I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her."

10 Then Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus into their hands. 11 When they heard this, they were delighted and promised to give him money. So Judas began looking for an opportunity to betray him.

1. Already here you see Mark, the author painting a picture for us of contrasts in how folks are regarding Jesus, and how they demonstrate their feelings toward him through action.
 - a) we hear about the **religious elites who have no allegiance to Jesus**. They're plotting to take him down. They're not part of his circle.
 - b) Then we hear about **Jesus' crew**. The folks he's spending the intimate moments of his last days with. He's being hosted for dinner by someone named Simon the leper, which like means someone he healed of leprosy, if they're now able to be restored to society and host people in their home. We know he's there with his friends, his disciples. And **there's also this woman**.
 - c) **In Mark, we don't hear who she is. John, in his version of the story, says it's Mary of Bethany**, the sister of Martha. The one who sat at Jesus feet to learn torah from the rabbi. The one who saw her brother Lazarus come out of the tomb. Likely it was her. Here she is, at this party at Simon's house, and she brings out a very expensive bottle of perfume. **Worth a year's wages**. And she doesn't just pop the cork and pour out an ounce. She expends this whole bottle of perfume on anointing Jesus. It's a splurge. It's luxurious.
 - d) And **some of Jesus' closest followers are offended**. They don't get it. **Isn't this an unwise use of funds?** If she wanted to be helpful, she should have sold the perfume and made a donation to the ministry. Why did she have to splurge in this way? This could have been allocated more wisely and efficiently.
 - e) But Jesus praises the woman. **He praises her faithfulness**. He corrects his followers for their critique. Why? Are they wrong to want to serve the poor? Isn't that also important?
2. First lesson on fidelity: **Fidelity is not simply about evaluating actions as morally right or wrong. Fidelity considers how our actions work to build up or break down our relationships.**
 - a) Simon the leper, the woman with the perfume: these folks recognize something that Jesus closest friends have perhaps started to take for granted. **Their connection to Jesus is precious. Their relationship with him is important**. And relationships are not static - you simply have them or you don't. Relationships are in need of ongoing care. They're being made stronger or weaker every day. Our actions toward one another have a direct impact on the strength of those relationships.
 - b) **So yes, spending money on the poor is important and good. It's a morally good action of course**; Jesus is not dismissing that value. But relationship, connection personally to Jesus, **taking the time to honor that relationship**, and particularly to be aware of the gravity of the moment they are in, days before his death, this also has immense value. **This woman, perhaps Mary, seems to sense there's a timeliness to this moment, in which choosing actions that honor the relationship have the priority**. And he praises her for this insight. *You can do good for the poor at any moment, but I won't always be here. You can't always show me love, affection, honor.*
 - c) **In total contrast to the woman, we see Judas**. We're told elsewhere that he's the treasurer of the group, he manages the purse. And we get the sense that perhaps this very event impacts his decision to betray Jesus. Thinking through how to spending

money wisely is important, **but for Judas, his financial calculations have gotten in the way of his relational connection to Jesus.** And that seems to lead him ultimately to actions not of faithfulness, but actions of betrayal.

3. **The story goes on.** We're going to skip ahead a bit. If we read the chapter straight through, the next episode related would be the Last Supper: Jesus sending his followers ahead of him to make preparations in the upper room of a house, for them to observe the Passover Meal. There he dines with them. He freaks them out by predicting that one of them will betray him. He breaks bread and offers it to them, calling it his body. He passes a glass of wine and calls it his blood. He issues another cryptic prediction, as they drink: "I will no longer drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." And then we move to the second passage we're gonna look at.

B. Part 2:

27 Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away, for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.' (this was a quote from the prophet Zechariah.)

28 But after I am raised, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." 29 Peter said to him, "Even if they all fall away, I will not!" 30 Jesus said to him, "I tell you the truth, today—this very night—before a rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times." 31 But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I must die with you, I will never deny you." And all of them said the same thing.

1. We'll pause there. I gotta say, **I love the passion of Peter here.** He often talks a big game; he's the type to wear his heart on his sleeve, and, here his words carry **so much passion for Jesus.** Mark says he insists emphatically "Even if I must die with you, I will never deny you." It's lovely. But we also know, if we've read the rest of the story, that it's not true.
2. **Jesus isn't confused.** You can sense the resignation in his voice as he recalls the words of the prophet, and gives them a heads up. "You guys are gonna leave me." And despite their denials, perhaps a little overly enthusiastic to compensate for their insecurity in the face of fear, Jesus is calling it right. And this little passage brings us another insight on fidelity.
3. Lesson two: **Fidelity expects us to demonstrate our intentions not just through words, but through actions that support them, even when those actions are costly.**
 - a) You gotta **back up what you say.** Otherwise, your words, as well-meaning as they may be, are useless.
 - b) This is **forever the conversation with my kids.** I catch them doing something they know they're not supposed to. They apologize. But their apologies don't feel sincere when they turn around and keep doing the same thing.
 - c) For the **wounded lover who has caught their partner cheating**, it's not enough for the cheating partner to tell her spouse that it's over, that she's madly in love with them, that they're the only one for her. **If she keeps Tinder on her phone, those words don't mean a lot.**
 - d) These disciples talk a big game. And they may sincerely believe their words are true, but they're only so meaningful if they don't have the actions to really support them.

C. Part 3: **32 Then they went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." 33 He took Peter, James, and John with him, and became very troubled and distressed. 34 He said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, even to the**

point of death. Remain here and stay alert.” 35 Going a little farther, he threw himself to the ground and prayed that if it were possible the hour would pass from him. 36 He said, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Take this cup away from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” 37 Then he came and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, “Simon, are you sleeping? Couldn’t you stay awake for one hour? 38 Stay awake and pray that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” 39 He went away again and prayed the same thing. 40 When he came again he found them sleeping; they could not keep their eyes open. And they did not know what to tell him. 41 He came a third time and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough of that! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. 42 Get up, let us go. Look! My betrayer is approaching!”

43 Right away, while Jesus was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived. With him came a crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent by the chief priests and experts in the law and elders. 44 (Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I kiss is the man. Arrest him and lead him away under guard.”) 45 When Judas arrived, he went up to Jesus immediately and said, “Rabbi!” and kissed him. 46 Then they took hold of him and arrested him.

1. So here in this passage we see again and again struggles with faithfulness. Struggles with betrayal. And the various struggles described remind us that **sometimes our failures of faithfulness are bold faced, brazen, obvious**. A kiss on the cheek, a sign of affection, used to catalyze one’s downfall. That’s pretty clear betrayal. But **other betrayals are more subtle**.
2. Right after protesting so vehemently that they would never fall away from him, **Jesus closest three friends, his posse, have the chance to demonstrate their faithfulness to Jesus**. I’m trying to imagine my response being with Jesus that night. He pulls you three aside, he looks you in the eyes, and this guy that is always so cool, so collected, so together, you can tell something has shifted. He’s losing it. Mark says he is “very troubled and distressed.” He tells them, “I have never felt like this before. My soul is troubled, even to the point of death. Stay with me. Pray with me.” **And what do they do? They keep falling asleep**. They can’t help it. They just can’t hang with Jesus in the angst. Three times it says they fall asleep. Three times they let him down. Three times Peter will deny him. In brazen and subtle ways Jesus’ closest friends disappoint him. They betray him. It’s agonizing.
3. And these various ways that Jesus’ friends let him down ask us to reflect on the nature of fidelity in relationships. Our third lesson: **Fidelity requires different things from us at different times**.
 - a) At times, **fidelity means resisting or redirecting sexual desire**, when we recognize that it’s pulling us to someone beyond the partner we’re committed to.
 - b) At times, fidelity can mean **making painful financial decisions**; not spending our money on the thing we want to provide for our ailing parent, or our kids music lessons, or our partner’s graduate degree. What did the woman who anointed Jesus give up to spend a year’s wages on this act of devotion to Jesus? Likely she wasn’t living in luxury with tons of expensive perfume to spend however she wanted. Just like the money could have fed the poor, it could have had other benefits to her personally or

her family, but she felt that faithfulness require her to use her resources to honor Jesus in that moment.

- c) At times, not always, but at times, fidelity can mean **sacrificing our own physical comfort**, our own needs, even very natural needs like food and sleep, **to accompany those we love**. Any parent of a newborn understands this. The baby is not gonna respect our sleep schedule.
- d) In this moment, for this one night, **Jesus wanted his friends to resist their physical need**. To stay up with him, despite their tiredness. Faithfulness means understanding what's needed in this moment to support relationship. **And in that moment, it was watching awake with Jesus.**
- e) **But their bodies couldn't do it**. And that's real too. Jesus seems to understand it. "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." It is part of the human experience, even with those we love, to struggle with faithfulness.

(1) **Esther Perel is a relationship counselor, researcher, author, and speaker, who has down a lot of work around infidelity in intimate relationships.** Her most recent book is called *The State of Affairs*. And in it, she seeks not simply to assign blame or prescribe answers to folks struggling with infidelity. She seeks to understand the reasons that underlay cheating. She wants to discover the contributing factors. She knows that sexual desire alone does not cause most people to cheat, there are other things going on in the relationship. The infidelity is often the symptom of a bigger problem in the relationship. And as Perel notes, some people feel threatened or resentful of this approach. But Perel is clear: **understanding is not the same as justifying**. Infidelity can be wrong, it can be unjustifiable. It can also still be understandable. Both are true.

(2) **Jesus seems to understand that his friends will fail him.** It is costly for him when they do. You can hear the "really, guys?" exasperation in his voice, as he comes back the second and third time and finds them sleeping *again*. **But even as he is disappointed, even as his worst suspicions are already being confirmed, Jesus sees beyond their lapse. He believes that this particular failure isn't a deal breaker.** "You will all fall away,...but after I am raised, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." Remember, they're in Jerusalem, on the other side of the country. He's telling them, I'll meet you back at home. After it all goes down, I'll see you in Galilee. **He's accepting their weakness, and promising to see them on the other side of that. This is hopeful for Jesus's friends, and it's hopeful for all of us, who will inevitable fail those we love.**

4. And this brings me to our last insight on fidelity from Jesus: **Jesus himself is able to model fidelity for us, and empower us to remain faithful, as he is faithful.**

- a) These passages aren't just about Jesus' friends struggling to be faithful to Jesus. They are **also about Jesus struggling to be faithful to God.**

(1) That's **the heart of Gethsemane**. We see the **struggle of Jesus, in his humanity**. He knows the end is near. He knows it will be painful, it will be bloody, it will be costly. He knows that no part of him wants to go through this. And so he prays, take this cup away. If there could be another way, make a way.

(2) But Jesus also knows and understands something else. He also knows that this is necessary. Perhaps it helps particularly here that he is both fully human, and he is filled with God's Holy Spirit, which **reminds him in this moment that this painful end is ultimately the climax of what he was sent to do**. He knows that

faithfulness to the God he loves and is loved by requires this. **And so with the help of that Spirit he prays, not my will, but your will be done.**

- (3) **This, for him is faithfulness.** Its a faithfulness that will endure, his capture. It will endure his trial. It will endure his beating, the ridicule, it will endure his friends falling away. It will endure death on a cross.
- (4) **The faithfulness of Jesus towards his friends, towards those he loves, towards all of us is an important facet in the greater story the Bible is telling: that God, the triune God, wants to demonstrate relational faithfulness to us.** That God is pursuing us. That God fulfills God's covenantal commitments to humanity. And the hope in Jesus, is that **God goes as far as embodying the human experience to live that faithfulness, so that we could find fellowship in our struggle to remain faithful, and freedom and hope through the empowerment of God's spirit, to live into greater fidelity in our relationships with one another and our relationships with God's self.** Jesus himself lives a life of faithfulness to God and to humanity, even unto death. God celebrates that faithfulness through resurrection, and invites us too, to hope for a life beyond sacrifice, a life that remains, caught up in a God of love because love is at the center of the way we live. And with the sending of God's Spirit, the same Spirit that encouraged Jesus in his frailest moments, **God invites us into an experience in this life in which the Holy Spirit assists us in our weakness, yielding fruit that we couldn't yield ourselves.** As Paul names it in Galatians: *"the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."*

- III. As we end, I want just to make some space for us to **lean into calling on the help of the Spirit to grow in faithfulness.** I'm gonna lead us into a contemplative moment with God around this.
 - A. Spirit we invite you to be present with us. And I ask that you would help highlight one particular relationship in which we feel challenged to embody faithfulness to those we love.
 - 1. In what ways have our actions towards this person built up relationship? In what ways have they broken down relationship?
 - 2. Where have our actions matched our words? Where have they not?
 - 3. What kind of actions are needed to bring greater healing and intimacy in this relationship at this moment?
 - 4. Invite God to empower you by the Spirit to have the courage, the patience, the strength, the honesty, to fulfill these actions.