

### Commitment As Steadfast Love

Exodus 32:1-14 *...they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them.*

Psalms 106:1-6, 19-23 *O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good; for God's steadfast love endures forever.*

Philippians 4:1-9 *...stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.*

Commitment is essential to the life of faith. Without committing ourselves to the journey of faith in its inward and outward dimensions, not much, if anything, happens. We can talk about the importance of silence and prayer, but when we make a commitment to give time each day to it, then things start to happen—self-understanding, awareness of God's presence and call in our lives, the capacity to be at peace, and so forth. We can talk about faith as trusting God, but when we step out toward some call we feel from God to use our gifts in the service of life, not knowing where we are going or how we are going to do it, then we experience the reality of God's leading and provision. An old Jewish story says that the waters of the Red Sea did not part until the first Israelite jumped in. That's commitment, giving ourselves wholeheartedly to loving God and following Jesus Christ. This faith community was begun as an expression of that belief. The life of faith begins with God's grace and love given us freely in Christ. But the fullness of the life of faith unfolds as we respond by committing ourselves in specific ways to the journey of faith in its inward and outward dimensions.

However, I've could never cozy up to the word commitment. It lacks warmth and joy. If not thoughtfully understood, it can lead to a lot of problems, like self-righteousness—"I'm more committed than you are!"—or turning the vibrancy of the life of faith into deadening legalism. The vision of the Church of the Covenant is that each person might grow into the fullness of the life of faith. That's a joyful and exciting thing. It means coming alive to who we really are and are meant to be. It does take commitment to experience that growth, that joy and excitement. No one is going to do it for us. Faith is not something we experience vicariously through other people, as saintly as they may be. The life of faith is something each of us must discover, struggle with, and find for ourselves in the uniqueness of our own lives. Maybe this is what Paul had in mind when he said earlier in his Letter to the Philippians, we are to "work out our own salvation with fear and trembling (2:12)."

I think the words "**steadfast love**" can help us find a fuller and richer meaning of commitment and keep it in the right perspective. The psalms are full of references to God's steadfast love, like the psalm for today: "God's steadfast love endures forever." The most frequent description of God is "steadfast love" (*hesed*). It is who God is and what God does. God cares for and about us, and the well being of the creation and all its creatures. Love is at the heart of the universe. That love is steadfast, always there, never giving up. It always seeks new ways of bringing life. This love is not an emotion that comes and goes, but a will, a devotion that keeps longing and working for the harmony and welfare of the world. It is God's commitment to the world.

### Our lives are meant to be expressions of the very steadfast love of God.

We can love with the same love with which God loves us and the world, a love that is steadfast and dynamic, that does not give up, finding creative and new expressions.

"Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, **stand firm in the Lord.**" Paul closes his Letter to the Philippians with a call to steadfast love. "Stand firm" in God by keeping with those practices and struggles that are part being a community of Christ. We can't discover or express the fullness of God's love in Christ unless we are staying with it, unless we devote ourselves to practice, to the kinds of disciplines we lift up in our community. They ground us in God, keep us moving and growing in our faith. Prayer in all its dimensions. Study of scripture and reading that challenges, stretches, and nourishes our minds and spirits. Financial giving that is serious enough to remind us that all we are and have belongs to God. Striving to show love and forgiveness in all relationships. Being involved in specific ministries that serve our faith community or the wider world. Discovering, affirming, and using our gifts for the benefit of all. Sharing honestly with others how we are doing with all of this.

**Spiritual disciplines, or practices, are the way we make steadfast love concrete and real.** When we work with such practices as a matter of steadfast love toward God, ourselves, and the world, we have the deepest motivation—to love with the love of God. If our practice is not awakening in us a deeper, fuller love, then we need to look closely at our motivations. We undertake this life of faith in order to be part of God's redeeming of life in steadfast love.

**The inward journey is the way we practice God's steadfast love toward ourselves.** When we establish a daily time of prayer and meditation, we are making a commitment to our own lives. We move toward self-understanding, self-acceptance, and sensitivity to God's will for our lives. We can become non-judgmentally aware of all the stuff inside us—the good stuff and the bad stuff, the flowers and the garbage. We learn to deal gently the things that are difficult, the things we don't like about ourselves. Instead of running from them or hating ourselves, we embrace the whole of our life in loving acceptance that allows us to let go of our guilt, fear, or anger. We also nurture and affirm those parts of ourselves that are positive, good, and healthful. Paul reminded the Philippian community to always contemplate what is honorable, just, pure, pleasing, excellent, and worthy of praise. This is watering the good seeds in us even as we deal gently with the not-so-good seeds.

Commitment to our inward journey affirms our lives as important, that we need to cherish and take care of these lives God has given us. There are days when we don't want to give time to the inward journey or we feel we are getting nowhere or that the whole business seems selfish, given all the urgent needs around us. That is when "steadfastness" becomes important. We keep at it. We don't give up, no matter how disappointed we are in ourselves, no matter how little progress we feel we are making, or how much we doubt the importance of what we are doing relative to the great problems of the world. We keep practicing steadfast love toward ourselves as though it is the most important thing we can do for the sake of the world. Otherwise, how can God use us as instruments, channels of God's own love?

**Commitment is also about practicing steadfast love in community with others, in our relationships.** Paul asked the Philippian community to help two women repair their relationship. These women had fallen out or come to blows or in

some way were alienated from each other. [We must note that whatever Paul said about the “place of women” elsewhere, or for whatever reasons he said it, here Paul plainly calls Syntyche and Euodia co-workers who have “struggled beside him in the work of the gospel.”]

Steadfast love in community means that we make a commitment to other people, to be with them in a community of love. We are not isolated individuals. Our lives are interrelated with others. To commit to a community of faith means that we finally decide to stop looking for greener pastures and perfect people. We finally understand that wherever we go, we will encounter conflicts and differences of viewpoint and lifestyle. Our egos will clash and sparks will fly. When we commit to a faith community with steadfast love, we give ourselves to practicing with others the same kindness, forgiveness, acceptance, and willingness to work things through that we practice with ourselves. We learn the humility that comes from understanding ourselves within a fabric of human life—we are not the center of the universe, neither are we unimportant. We learn that each life, including our own, is a gift and that each person, including us, has gifts to share. Paraphrasing Jean Vanier, when we first enter a faith community, we may do so for what we can get out of it, out of our ego needs. But we stay in order to discover what we can give for the sake of the community.

Steadfast love in community means that we stop our habit of seeing other people as the problem or looking to others to be what we want them to be, to react the way we want them to react. Instead, we see ourselves both as part of the problem and the solution. We grow in understanding that there is something larger than myself—community—in which I discover my true self. We learn how to affirm and exercise the gift of our own lives while at the same time giving others the space and freedom to do the same. That is always a challenge, but a tremendous blessing when we learn how to do it.

**Commitment as steadfast love is very important when it comes to what we feel Christ is calling us to do with our lives, our ministry or mission.** If we are on an outward journey of offering our gifts for the sake of others and the world, if we are involved in some mission that we believe God has called us to, then there will always be times when we want to give up and quit. It becomes too hard. People don’t respond. We don’t feel appreciated or supported. We get scared when faced with something we have no idea how to do. We wonder where the people, the money, and the energy are going to come from. Sometimes we just feel that our little bitty efforts simply have no effect. All of these are opportunities to go deeper in steadfast love.

Let’s go back to that story of the golden calf. Moses is up on the mountain getting the Ten Commandments. The people are below anxious to get on with it. They need something tangible, something they can put their hands on, instead of this unseen God who drags them around the desert hungry and thirsty all the time. Faith is just too hard. Trusting God is just too demanding. Make us a god that we can see and touch and worship, they say to Aaron. Aaron complies. The calf is made and they have a great time.

God sees what’s going on and tells Moses to get down there and do something about “your” people. It’s like one spouse saying to the other, “Will you do something about your child! I’ve had it!” God is fed up with the whining and complaining: “Moses, leave me alone so that I can stew in my anger, for I’m going to wipe these people out. You I will save to do something with.” Moses then

confronts God. Look, if you do this, the Egyptians will love scoffing at this god who brought people out of slavery only to kill them in the desert. Moses appeals to God’s steadfast love, God’s very identity. And it works. God repents, changes his mind, and the covenant is renewed yet again.

Now, I’m not sure what to do with this God who gets so angry and threatens to wipe people out. But I think the story is very important. If even God, who IS steadfast love, gets that fed up, then there is hope for us, who want to throw the towel in about every day. God has this tantrum, this meltdown, just like we do. God gets to the point of giving up, but then, with Moses’ help, remembers. We need someone in our lives—Our mission group? A spiritual friend? Our community itself?—who can tell us at the right time not to give up. I find this all very comforting. Steadfast love, commitment, includes moments when we want to hang it up and just go back to the way things were before we got into this following Jesus stuff, before we began this inward and outward journey that presents us with such challenges and feels so often like wandering around in the desert. We can be honest about it. We don’t need to feel ashamed or guilty when we want to give up on ourselves, other people, or the world. We acknowledge it, but then go back to prayer, to quieting our hearts and minds, and remember that we are God’s beloved children and this is God’s beloved world. We can touch again the love that is at the heart of everything, including our own hearts. The points at which we are ready to give up are precisely where we break through to greater understanding and living of steadfast love. In fact, this is the biblical meaning of doubt. Doubt is not an intellectual problem we have with some idea about God, or Jesus, or anything else. Doubt is the opposite of faith, of trust. Here we see that doubt is a part of the life of faith. Without doubt, we cannot have faith. Without moments when we want to give up, we can’t have moments when we renew and deepen our love, our commitment. The two go together in the process of being those who live by steadfast love.

I hope that this has helped us see the importance of commitment. When we are courageous enough to make a commitment to our own inward journey, to our community of faith, and to something God has given us to do, I hope we will see that we are sharing in God’s steadfast love for the world. Surely this makes commitment something we desire with all our heart.