

AN OLD-FASHIONED VIRTUE
AUGUST 25, 1985
JOHN 6:56-69

"Many of Jesus' followers turned back and would not go with him any more. So he asked the twelve disciples, 'And you--would you also like to leave?'" (John 6:66-67) The basic component of any group is loyalty, an old-fashioned virtue. Even Jesus' ministry was dependent on loyalty, and when loyalty was needed, his followers fell like flies.

Every group to exist must cultivate loyalty and keep it. Club loyalty, school loyalty, company loyalty, church loyalty, family loyalty. No club, business, country, team, cause or movement can survive without loyalty. Loyalty is the life-blood.

The marriage commitment begins with loyalty. There is no marriage without loyalty. Loyalty is the least one spouse can expect from the other. No staff can long survive without loyalty to one another and loyalty to the common goal. Church membership begins with loyalty. The final question asked of persons desiring to unite with the church is, "Will you be loyal to the United Methodist Church?" Queen Mary summarized the place of loyalty in our lives by this advice to her granddaughter, Elizabeth II.

Remember that life is made up of loyalty--loyalty to your friends; loyalty to things beautiful and good; loyalty to the country which you love; and, above all, for this holds all other loyalties together, loyalty to God.

Yet loyalty is often considered an old-fashioned virtue. Loyalty is not popular in our culture. Many couples today are living together without the benefit of marriage. Advocates say the couples can test their sexual compatibility, get in touch with their feelings for each other, and prepare themselves for marriage. Statistically, however, living together before marriage does not guarantee the success of the marriage any better than the old system. In the past 15 years divorces, broken homes, sexual bitterness and confusion, and unwanted children have increased at about the same rate as couples living together.

The problem with living together is not one of love, but of loyalty. Love, to some degree, might very well be present, but loyalty, at least to the degree needed, is not. Loyalty cannot be created by some kind of commitment that has a built-in escape hatch. Let me be perfectly clear! I am not necessarily opposing the practice of living together. The old system did not foster stable marriages either! My concern is with loyalty. Any commitment--and especially the commitment to spend the rest of your life with someone--begins with loyalty. Without loyalty there is nothing.

Employers today often complain about the lack of loyalty among employees. A pharmacy manager recently complained about the teenagers in his town. He said, "They really don't want to work. If they have a big game or date on Friday night, they see nothing wrong in calling in sick on Saturday." Some employers cynically accuse their employees of being more loyal to their union than to the company. On the other hand, some employers, some companies need to be asked, "To what do you give your loyalty? Only to profit? No consideration for your employees or responsibility to your customers?"

Loyalty is not popular, nor is it an easy virtue. Jesus discovered that people will be loyal as long as not too much is required. Jesus was at first an overnight sensation. Crowds gathered to hear him. They followed him about as if he were a rock star. But, it didn't last. In John 6:60, "Many of his followers...said, 'This teaching is too hard. Who can listen to it?'" Jesus knew they were grumbling and were leaving him, so he asked his disciples, "And you--would you also like to leave?" It was not and is not easy to follow Jesus. Jesus did not try to enforce loyalty. He did the only thing he could do; he asked if his followers would be loyal.

Loyalty frightens some people. I suspect that most brides and grooms get cold feet before their wedding. They have doubts and wonder what they are getting themselves into. Some have a negative concept of marriage and think of loyalty, responsibility and commitment as heavy burdens, like yokes about their shoulders.

Is loyalty a burden? Is loyalty an old-fashioned, out-of-date virtue? What are the benefits of loyalty? First, loyalty gives one a sense of identity, a sense of belonging. Students of management principles are concluding that a secret of Japanese business success is the loyalty that employees feel toward the company and the pride they take in their work. The company treats their employees as extended family. The company gets involved in the lives of its workers-- health problems, family problems. Some call it paternalism, some call it smart management. In exchange for consideration and respect, loyalty is given. Through the loyalty given, the employee feels an identity, feels he/she belongs with the company.

The response of the President of Japan Air Lines to the recent crash was revealing. He personally met the families of those killed, bowing to them and apologizing for the accident. Envelopes with money were personally delivered to the homes of the victims. I suspect that those families will continue to be loyal customers of Japan Air Lines.

I taught three years in a Methodist school in Nagoya, Japan, as a short-term missionary and learned that in Japan, society is not fragmented. The school, like the companies, assumes responsibility and gets involved in the lives of its students. I remember one evening accompanying a home-room teacher to the police station. One of our students got in trouble with the police and not only his

family was called to the station, but his school teacher as well. The school was considered part of the student's extended family and a wholistic approach to the boy's trouble was taken. You can understand why a Japanese is loyal to school, company and nation.

As I read Tom Peters in the book, In Search of Excellence, and his new book, A Passion for Excellence, I understand him to be saying that companies today will succeed when they instill a sense of loyalty in their employees. He quotes a manager at Hewlett-Packard, "The best managers are the ones whose people want to get up in the morning and work for them." They inspire loyalty. He also quotes a manager from Dana Corporation, "We turn the company back over to the people who do the work." The people who do the work feel that the company is theirs. They identify with it. They belong. They are loyal.

Last winter was severe in Minnesota. Temperatures of 20 degrees below zero and a wind chill factor of negative 49 degrees were experienced in late January. Sunday morning worship attendance at Brooklyn United Methodist Church, in the Minneapolis suburb of Brooklyn Park, was skimpy. It seemed no one wanted to face the frigid, icy wind that whipped outside. But there, among the scattered worshippers who had braved the elements, was 88-year-old Goldie Schrieber. She had driven to church that morning after picking up Anna Hamilton, who turned 100 in October. They sat with their 94-year-old friend Fran Sparks. One parishioner observed, "It is this kind of loyalty that has kept our church alive for 130 years." I doubt that if those women consider loyalty old-fashioned or a burden. Loyalty to their church is a joy, not a burden, for they belong to their church and in that loyalty is their identity.

Loyalty gives you a sense of identity, and secondly, loyalty unwraps the secret of the mystery of life. In his autobiography, Dr. Joseph Fort Newton maintains that there are four things, and only four things, that you can do with your life. First, you can run away from your life, or try to. Second, you can run along with life, hunt with the pack, think with the herd--everybody's doing it, why shouldn't I? Third, you can take hold of life with singleness of purpose and, submitting yourself to discipline, attempt to achieve that goal. Fourth, you can give yourself up utterly in self-surrender to a Cause or a Person and let the Cause or the Person give you direction.

A man was finding little purpose in life and, feeling listless and depressed, consulted his doctor who gave him this advice. "Start somewhere and latch on to something outside yourself. Attach yourself to some major league ball team and cheer it on to a pennant." That's a beginning. Identifying yourself as an A's fan or a Giants fan, losing yourself in the 49er fever, are ways to mental health. The mystery of life is unlocked by losing yourself in something that is bigger than you, larger than your immediate, selfish interests.

AN OLD-FASHIONED VIRTUE

DOUGLAS NORRIS

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

AUGUST 25, 1985

Loyalty is basically religious. Loyalty is the solution of the spiritual problem. Your true life is found outside yourself through self-surrender. When you consider self-surrender--actually giving your loyalty, giving yourself to something or someone outside yourself--make that self-surrender to God, for, in the ultimate sense, only Christ is worthy of you. To what do you want to give your supreme loyalty? To whom do you want to surrender yourself--your mind, your ambition, your talents, your dreams? Is there anything or anyone worthy of you, other than the God who made you and who loves you, as revealed to you through Jesus Christ?

Loyalty is not old-fashioned. Loyalty is how you know where you belong. Loyalty is the keeping of your commitments. Loyalty is not easy, but it is the way to Life (with a capital "L"). To what are you loyal? Your ultimate loyalty belongs to God. Have you committed your life to Jesus Christ? Will you be loyal? Are ye able?