

The Eleventh Plate

Frankton – 11/15/15

Scripture: Hebrew 13.1-8 Rules for Christian living

Proposition: We should be loyal to our loyal God.

[SLIDE] Aaron Feuerstein is a loyal guy. In fact he embraces loyalty like Polar Fleece hugs schoolchildren on a chilly fall morning. In a culture where work environments breed insecurity and layoffs are routine, Aaron Feuerstein ranks as a hero in the cold-hearted dog-eat-dog world of business. Decades ago when all the other textile mills left town to settle in sunnier locations, Feuerstein who is the chairman, president, and CEO of Malden Mills, decided against the tide and kept his factory in blue collar Lawrence, Massachusetts. You see, many textile mills moved out to get cheaper labor and cheaper utilities. But, Feuerstein was undaunted as he kept his mill running and profitable largely through making the fabric we know as Polar Fleece, which was created at Malden Mills.

Then tragedy struck. Just a few weeks before Christmas in the year 1995, Malden Mills burned to the ground, a total loss. Feuerstein announced almost immediately that all of the mills' workers would continue to be paid, even though they would not be working. On top of that, he announced they would also receive health care benefits during the reconstruction of the factory. The business world reeled. Even when a handful of workers sued him - in spite of his extraordinary generosity to them - he empathized with their plight. [SLIDE] "They are poor people," Feuerstein explained, "with lawyers throwing astronomical settlement figures their way, they could not resist." He loyally forgave them even for their own lack of loyalty.

If Feuerstein, who is a Hebrew, were to read the book of Hebrews, in chapter 13 he would find an eclectic mix of not-so-exceptional rules for life. In the first part of the chapter, the author lists several ways of Christian living: [SLIDE] continue to love each other, be hospitable, [SLIDE] remember prisoners and victims of torture, honor marriage, [SLIDE] relinquish the love of money, remember your spiritual leaders. Who can argue with these words? Such sage sayings are sprinkled throughout Scripture. But in the midst of these maxims found near the end of this letter to the Hebrews, a stunning pronouncement leaps off the page: [SLIDE] *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.*

Excuse me? Nothing lasts forever - isn't that another popular adage? Let's think about that one a little bit. Do the names: Fannie Mae, Freddy Mac, AIG, and Bear-Stearns mean anything to anyone? Many financial institutions once thought practically invincible, were either bailed-out, bought out, or are already bankrupt and shuttered. What about some items that have real importance like Brad Pitt and Jennifer Anniston? Yesterday's committed relationship is today's fading memory. Isn't that the way life goes? Nothing lasts forever. Not relationship. Not business. Not fortune.

[SLIDE] Let me paraphrase Paul's words in verse 5: Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have. Yeah right. Such words run counter to everything Forbes and Money magazines preach as well as all those ads on TV that tell you that you can earn tens of

thousands of dollars each month by working from your home, part-time. The love of money tends to drive us all, not just CEO-wannabes. Being content with what we have is anathema to every subtle and not so subtle message that the advertising industry bombards us with. We live for advancement! We strive for the raise! We cast our gift-giving hopes on the Christmas bonus! We want bigger, better, more and more. The phrase "Semper Fi" is the Marine motto which is a Latin derivative of the phrase "always faithful." We're really good at Semper Fi, until another more enticing opportunity comes knocking on our door, and then it's "Hasta la vista, baby."

Yet in the midst of this constantly changing world and constantly changing us, Jesus stands as the exception to every standard operating procedure known to humanity and to all the accepted rules of business. In a world where everything changes, Jesus is a rock. In a world where the Richie Riches walk the red carpet, Jesus doesn't even watch the ceremony on television. In a world where the downtrodden are abandoned, Jesus hangs out with the least, the last, the lost, the lonely, and the left-out among us. God hangs tough - always. And this never changes.

Unfortunately, our loyalty to Christ wavers, unlike Christ's loyalty to us. Christ gave up his earthly life for us so that we could have a heavenly life with him. His spirit still watches out for us, guiding and directing us, and yet we fail to be loyal to him. He gave his all and yet we don't. We don't give our whole life for him. We don't live our whole life for him. We don't give him what he deserves or even what he asks for. We think of ourselves first rather than giving in response to what Christ has already done for us. We let other things get in the way of our giving back to Christ.

I want to show you that by way of example and I'm going to need a few volunteers who are willing to come up front with me. First of all, let me assure you that I will not embarrass you. And also, let me tell you that you will be able to take something back to your seat with you that may put a smile on your face. So I need eleven volunteers. (Get volunteers and line them up.) [SLIDE] I'm going to give each of you a plate with a brownie on it and I want you to hold it for a few minutes while I talk about what they represent. NO EATING while you're up here. You can eat when you get back to your seat. (Give each a plate. The last one gets the crumbs. Say to the last one: Sorry, about that. It didn't come out right when I cut them and tell the congregation the last plate only got the crumbs, the leftovers.)

OK. Let's talk about what these brownies represent. When taken together, these brownies represent your paycheck or monthly income or your annual income. Now each brownie represents a part of your income that goes to various things. On the bottom of each plate I wrote what each brownie represents. I'll come by each person and you can lift the plate up and see what your particular brownie represents. Don't turn your plate over to read what's on the bottom; lift it up! Let's start here. What does your brownie represent? {Go through the first ten plates and make a quick comment about each one. Plates in order represent: 1) taxes 2) housing/rent, 3) utilities, 4) car/truck payment, 5) insurance for house/car/truck/personal, 6) gasoline, 7) food, 8) clothing, 9) entertainment, 10) retirement/savings.}

Before we see what this eleventh plate represents, I want to remind you that it didn't come out right when I was cutting up the brownies, so this plate is basically just a couple of small pieces and some crumbs. OK, lift up your plate and tell us what your plate represents. {Action.} [SLIDE] That's right - it represents what we give to God. Where we give our resources tells us

about our loyalty to God. It tells us about how well we give in return for what God has already given to us. I think most people are like these plates. They spend money on all these other things – good things all – but by the time they get down to the end, the only thing left to give to God is the crumbs, the leftovers, the spare stuff we have laying around. What kind of loyalty does that show to a God who has been absolutely loyal to us? We tend to give God what's leftover, the spare stuff, rather than the first fruits he asks for. {Seat the volunteers to applause.}

During his interrogation, Pilate once asked Jesus, "What is truth?" He had no idea what a good question he posed. It used to be true that the world was flat. Then it was true that the world was round. It used to be true that a person stayed with a single company for 40 years and that company took care of retirees until death. Now it's true that companies trade workers and workers trade companies like people at a speed dating convention. It used to be true that couples promised to stay together "til death do us part", now it's "til irreconcilable differences do us part." It used to be true that spiritual leaders led all polls ranking trustworthiness, now dentistry is the most trusted occupation.

But through it all Jesus remains loyal. Whenever the other things that we have fail us or abandon us, and they will, one being remains who promises never to fail us, never to abandon us. In a world where change can terrify us, the following words pacify our senses: [SLIDE] *I will never fail you; I will never abandon you.* [5b] I hope you believe that God is even more loyal than Aaron Feuerstein was to his employees – helping them even when his chips were down. And if we do believe that, why do we not have that same kind of loyalty to God? Why do we give God the eleventh plate, the plate with the crumbs on it, the left-overs? I don't know about you, but I want to be loyal to God because he is loyal to me. I want to give to God in response to his loyalty to me.