

Rolheiser: What constitutes fidelity?

It's becoming increasingly difficult in today's world to trust anything or anybody, for good reason. There's little that's stable, safe to lean on, trustworthy. We live in a world where everything is in flux, is flux, where everywhere we see distrust, abandoned values, debunked creeds, people moving on from where they used to be, contradictory information, and dishonesty and lying as socially and morally acceptable. There is little left of trust in our world.

What does this call us to? We're called to many things, but perhaps nothing more important than fidelity, to be honest and persevering in who we are and what we stand for. Here's an illustration.

One of our Oblate missionaries shares this story. He was sent to minister to a cluster of small Indigenous communities in Northern Canada. The people were very nice to him but it didn't take him long to notice something. Basically every time he scheduled an appointment the person wouldn't show up. At first, he attributed this to miscommunication, but eventually he realized the pattern was too consistent for this to be an accident and so he approached an Elder in the community for some counsel.

"Every time I make an appointment with someone," he told the Elder, "they don't show up." The Elder smiled, knowingly, and replied: "Of course, they won't show up, the last thing they need is to have an outsider like you organizing their lives for them!" So the missionary asked: "What do I do?" The Elder replied: "Well, don't make an appointment, just show up and talk to them! They'll be nice to you. More importantly though, this is what you need to do: *Stay here for a long time and then they will trust you. They want to see whether you're a missionary or a tourist. Why should they trust you? They've been betrayed and lied to by most everyone who's come through here. Stay for a long time and then they'll trust you.*"

Stay for a long time and then they'll trust you. What does it mean to stay for a long time? We can hang around and not necessarily inspire trust, just as we can move on to other places and still inspire trust. In its essence, staying around for the duration, being faithful, has less to do with never moving from a given location than it has to do with staying worthy of trust, with staying faithful to who we are, to the creed we profess, to the commitments and promises we have made, and to what's truest inside us so that our private lives do not belie our public persona.

The gift of fidelity is the gift of a life lived honestly. Our private honesty blesses the whole community, just as our private dishonesty hurts the whole community.

"If you are here faithfully," writes Parker Palmer, "you bring great blessing." Conversely, writes Rumi, "If you are here unfaithfully, you bring great harm."

To the degree that we are true to the creed we profess, the family, friends, and communities we've committed to, and to the deepest moral imperatives within our private soul, to that degree we are faithfully with others, and to that degree we are "staying with them for a long time".

The reverse is also true, to the degree that we are not true to the creed we profess, to the promises we've made to others, and to the honesty innate in our own soul, we are being unfaithful, moving away from others, being the tourist not the missionary.

In his Epistle to the Galatians, St. Paul tells us what it means to be with each other, to live with each other, beyond geographical distance and other contingencies in life that separate us. We are with each, faithfully, as brothers and sisters, when we are living in charity, joy, peace, patience, goodness, long-suffering, mildness, perseverance, and chastity. When we are living inside these, then we are "staying with each other" and not moving away, no matter any geographical distance between us. Conversely, when we are living outside of these we are not "staying with each other", even when there is no geographical distance between us.

Home, as poets have always told us, is a place inside the heart, not a place on a map. And home, as St. Paul tells us, is living inside the Spirit. And it is this, I believe, that ultimately defines fidelity and perseverance, separates a moral missionary from a moral tourist, and indicates who's staying and who's moving away.

For each of us to stay faithful, we need each other. It takes more than a village, it takes all of us. One person's fidelity makes everyone's fidelity easier, just as one person's infidelity makes everyone's fidelity more difficult. So, inside a world that's so highly individualistic and bewilderingly transient, when it can feel as if everyone is forever moving away from you, perhaps the greatest gift we can give each other is the gift of our own fidelity, to stay for a long time.