

He Is the Father of Us All
Romans 4:13-25
May 15, 2022

In 2000, I burned out after pastoring on a circuit and preaching two to three times every Sunday morning for many years. Returning to worship after that was difficult however, as just one church service didn't seem to be enough, so I began attending three different services. I went to my home church Central United Methodist first, Allen Avenue Christian Reform next, and Evanston Avenue Baptist last. All are in Muskegon and fairly close together. The timing was just right and I could make each service before it started. Amazingly there weren't that many differences between them except that my friend Reverend Dr. Brian Oberg, being a good Baptist preacher, had an altar call after each service. A year or so later I was pastoring on an interim basis at Shelby United Methodist.

One day in May 2002, I got a call from Reverend Oberg asking me to stop off at his church so we could catch up. He asked me if I would like to come to their monthly congregational potluck dinner for seniors the next day. Being a good Methodist I accepted. You know how we Methodists like to eat. I stopped around noon. Unlike today I didn't quite qualify age wise as a senior but they overlooked it. The meal was wonderful. Between bites Brian and I got a chance to visit. After the meal there was a talk given by a woman eighty plus years of age who was young in spirit. Her name was Shirley Humdinger and she had just come back from a missionary trip to Portugal. She had spent the last two months creating a library at a mission high school. The school had nearly three-thousand books not one which had ever been cataloged. She had the time of her life. She was quite amazing---taking off at age eighty plus to do work for the Lord an ocean and a half a continent away, but at least she knew where she was going and how long she would be gone.

Abram or as we better know him, Abraham, was seventy-five years old when God told him to leave his homeland and extended family. Obeying God, Abraham packed up everything and left. He had no idea where God was taking him but only that God said he was to "go to a land I will show you." (Genesis 12:1) He and family and his household members made an eleven-hundred-mile journey from his home town of Ur of the Chaldeans in Mesopotamia to the land of Canaan. A move like that was not at all simple. Travel was a little more difficult forty-one hundred years ago. When God told Abraham to go, he didn't argue but placing his trust in God he left. For Abraham and his wife Sarah it was the greatest adventure of their lives. Abraham not only became the father of a great nation as God had promised him; God also told him that all the peoples of the

earth would be blessed through him. Abraham in addition was to become the father of faith.

Turning to our scripture: Paul is writing to the Jews and Gentiles who make up the church at Rome. He has hopes of visiting but hasn't been able to up to this point. In the meantime, he sent them a letter of introduction with a detailed explanation of Christian theology. Paul did live in Rome twice in the next ten years: once under house arrest for two years and the second time as a prisoner in a dungeon awaiting execution. There is no record of his ever visiting the church at Rome although he most certainly met some of its members. Those of Jewish descent were wondering about Paul's theology and some of his teachings about Christianity. Even though these were people in the congregation at Rome they continued holding on to many of their Jewish traditions. They were worried particularly about Paul's teachings concerning the law. They had reason to be concerned because Paul was teaching something new which was not the law of Moses, but the gift of God's grace. Paul wrote that they were not to turn their backs on the law because it was a useful tool in the development of faith. For those of Jewish faith, Moses was their hero as the great law giver. That had been true for centuries but Paul proposed there was perhaps a better one. "Paul suggested a new hero, Abraham, as an example of Christian faith. Paul argued that he lived his life by faith. Abraham became the father of faith." (1)

What can be said about faith? "Faith is, first of all, a matter of simple trust." (2) God promised Abraham that he would make him a great nation, that he would make his name great and later that he would have as many descendants as there are stars in the sky. (Gen 12:2 & 15:5) Surely Abraham and Sarah wondered how God was going to pull it off. After all, they were well past childbearing age. Paul wrote about Abraham, "without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead." (Romans 4:19a) Abraham had every reason to doubt God's promise...he and Sarah had long since given up on having children. But Abraham believed God's impossible promise, and in time the impossible became a reality. The Bible tells us that Abraham was one-hundred years old and Sarah was ninety when she gave birth to their son, Isaac. Faith, first of all is simple trust.

"Thomas Hobson kept a livery stable in Cambridge, England in the seventeenth century and he had one unbreakable rule. If you wanted to hire one of his horses, you had to take the one standing nearest to the stable door. If you insisted on another you got none at all. There were no alternatives. However, because Hobson was honest, dependable, and trustworthy, his customers had faith in him. They kept on coming back accepting the horse he gave them. However unsuitable for them the animal looked, they were never disappointed. The term 'Hobson's choice' usually means 'no choice at all.' It

also means trust, however. Sometimes life gives us no choice except the attitude with which we take it. That attitude, however, can make all the difference in the world.” (3) God gives us the choice of walking with him and it is always the right choice. Abraham learned to trust in God and his promises and he was not disappointed.

In addition to trusting God, we must be willing to accept God’s grace. Abraham was not the father of faith because he kept the letter of the law, but rather he lived a life of faith. Abraham was not a perfect man as Moses the writer of Genesis makes abundantly clear. I remember our commenting several times about Abraham’s questionable behavior when we were studying Genesis word for word years ago in Bible study. If Abraham had depended upon his own works to save him, he would have been doomed as all of us are doomed. “His faith,” Paul tells us, “Was credited to him as righteousness.” (4) It was his faith commitment that brought him into a right relationship with God and not his actions. God is righteous and he loves everyone. He acts morally and with justice toward all people. “He called Israel to be righteous as his chosen people. They were placed in his covenant, in right relationship with him through faith.” (5) Through insight provided by the Holy Spirit, Paul pointed out that Genesis 15:6 was the key to faith. “Abraham believed the Lord and it was credited to him as righteousness.” All the high points for the development of the Jewish faith except Abraham’s move to Canaan, occur after God’s response to Abraham’s faith, “by crediting righteousness to him.” (6) These high points include: God’s promise to be Israel’s God, the birth of Isaac, the 500 years as slaves in Egypt, the Passover, the Exodus, the giving of the law, their forty years in the wilderness, and their entry into the promised land. Although each is important, they all follow Abraham’s faith commitment. Paul argues that his faith commitment is the basis for their faith and not the law. Since the death of Moses fourteen hundred years before, the Israelites’ belief that one was to keep to the letter of the law in order to be in a right relationship with God, became more important than their faith. Paul argues that the Jews had missed the mark. A faith relationship is not the result of a zealous adherence to the keeping of laws, but a radical trust in God. Paul argues that faith is more important than law. The Israelites were unique among all peoples in that they understood that there was one God. They also knew that God graciously responded to Abraham’s faith. Paul contends that because of God’s gracious response, Abraham is the father of faith for the Jews and also for believing Gentiles. Paul goes on to write, “He is the father of us all.” (Rom 4:16 b)

Looking at our final three verses for this morning, Paul writes, “the words ‘it was credited to him’ were not written for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness---for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”

(Romans 4:23-25) There is a lot going on here and therefore I am turning to William Barclay for some insight. He says “It is the willingness to take God at his word which put Abraham into a right relationship with him. Now the Jewish rabbis had a saying to which Paul here refers. They said, ‘What is written of Abraham is written also of his children.’ They meant that any promise that God made to Abraham extends to his children also. Therefore, if Abraham’s willingness to take God at his word brought him into a right relationship with God, so it will be with us. It is not works of the law, it is this trusting faith which establishes the relationship between God and man which ought to exist.” (7)

In summary my friends, what is the relationship that ought to exist between God and man? It is one of salvation in which the believer is saved not by his or her own works, but by grace--God’s unmerited love and favor--through faith. This is the gift of God given to those with faith in him. The law condemns us all because we cannot keep it and are therefore doomed. We are sinners and do not have it within our own power to live such a righteous and holy life as to keep the law and merit God’s grace. Thankfully, it is not the law which saves, but faith. This is wonderful news for us. God, because of his love for each of us, takes the initiative in our redemption. We become the recipients of divine reconciliation. Paul writes: “for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.” (Rom 4:24b-25) Christ loves us so much that he willingly went to the cross, suffered and died in our place. Through faith, Christ the only righteous one, becomes our justifier. He is the one who took our sin upon himself and who declares us guiltless before the Lord God. So that we might be seen as righteous in God’s sight and have abundant and eternal life in and through him. Alleluia!

Amen.

(1) Dynamic Preaching February 1994 p. 23

(2) Ibid. p. 23

(3) Illustration: “Faith”

(4) Dynamic Preaching February 1994 p. 24

(5) NIV Compact Dictionary p. 507

(6) NIV Study Bible “notes” p. 35

(7) Romans William Barclay p. 70-71