

FIRST LESSON: Genesis 12:1-4
SECOND LESSON: Romans 4:1-5; 13-17
March 8, 2020
SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

“Abraham’s Faith and Ours”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

When I was a student in Scotland at the University of Edinburgh I had a flatmate named Heather who used a wonderful expression. Whenever anyone said something incredibly complex and difficult to understand she would say, “Oh, we had one but the wheels fell off.” I often feel like saying that when I read Paul. I’m sure he didn’t go out of his way to make his arguments challenging, and they may have been easier to follow at the time, but we always have to take them apart step by step.

The underlying issue Paul was dealing with is one we miss completely, because we have grown up in a church tradition that assumes Abraham is our spiritual father. Most of us are not Jews, yet we have embraced the Jewish scriptures and heroes as our own. But this assumption was not always in effect. In the earliest days of the church when Gentiles began coming to faith, people didn’t know what to do. How could these non-Jewish believers be heirs to the same promises as the Jewish people? How big is Abraham’s family?

The traditional Jewish answer to who the children of Abraham are is very concrete. It’s based on human biology. Abraham’s family are the Jews and only the Jews. Of course, some of the Pharisees might have further added, only law-abiding Jews. Paul was looking for a way in which Gentile believers could also be viewed as children of Abraham, and he found his answer in two parts. First, the scriptures actually say that Abraham was the father of many nations, not just the Jews. And second, in Paul’s understanding what made Abraham special was not that he earned the position by obedience to God. That would be the traditional Jewish understanding. Paul asserted that God’s grace made Abraham righteous and enabled him to do all the things he did. It was a gift he received by faith. Faith was the key that unlocked the door.

Paul’s rabbinic style involved asking a question and then answering it. Like all rabbis of the day he was extrapolating on a text from the bible, in this case Genesis 15:6. “Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” Paul says, “If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God . . . What does Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

If this sounds strange to us it’s not just because Paul is quoting, it’s because what is being used is literally banking terminology. This is an accountant’s word. God credited Abraham’s account just like a generous father

might pay off a son's debt to make him solvent and improve his credit score. Abraham was the beneficiary of a generous gift. If Abraham had done works to earn his place God would have no need to credit anything to his account, but Genesis says the only thing Abraham did was believe God.

As Paul continued to make his point that it was through faith and faith alone that Abraham received righteousness and the promises of God he wrote: "It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression."

This is the point where we all say "I had one but the wheels fell off."

So, let's first tackle the strange spin off about the law. In Paul's view the law just brings God's wrath because none of us can keep it perfectly. If there is no law, you can't break it! This is the neat little argument that we can't be held accountable for breaking a law if we didn't know about the law. *"I'm sorry officer, I didn't know that taking diamonds out of the store window and walking away with them was a crime!"* The "law" Paul was referring to in this case was the law of Moses which came 400 years AFTER Abraham. Abraham was not made righteous by the law, because it did not yet exist. Of course, this does not mean that people didn't sin or there was no accountability for sin before the law of Moses. This was just Paul making the argument that everything comes back to faith and grace, and confusing us in the process.

The promise of God to Abraham and to his offspring came through faith. If obedience to the law of Moses were enough, according to Paul there would be no need for faith. And to make matters worse, because no one can keep the law, everyone would be out of luck. But just before we think we've lost our minds trying to figure it all out, Paul finally gets to the point saying, "Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—**not only to those who are of the law** (that is, the Jews) **but also to those who have the faith of Abraham** (that is, everybody else.) He is the father of us all. As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations."

So all of this, everything Paul has said, really boils down to one thing. We can all be children of Abraham if we have faith. Faith is necessary for us to be saved, but it doesn't do the actual saving. God does that through Christ. And no one, Jew or Gentile, can earn salvation. If we could earn salvation, the cross would be unnecessary.

All of this talk about Abraham is very foreign to us. It's not something from our world. But to be a child of Abraham was a very important part of Jewish life and culture. The expression crops up throughout the gospels. Jesus refers to a woman he healed on the sabbath as a "daughter of Abraham." (Luke 13:16) When preaching to the crowds John the Baptist said, "And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham." (Luke 3: 8) Jesus himself rebuked his attackers who claimed Abraham as their father. "If you were

Abraham's children," said Jesus, "then you would do what Abraham did. As it is, you are looking for a way to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. (John 8: 39-40)

When Paul wrote to the Romans half of the members were Jewish believers and half Gentiles. This automatically created a caste system, because the Jews could fully identify with everything in the Old Testament and embrace the promises as their own. They knew they were children of Abraham! But Gentiles did not seem to be included. And yet God was apparently breaking God's own rules by including them! The Spirit of God was at work opening the hearts and minds of Gentiles to have faith in Christ. So Paul was trying to explore one way of making sense of it. We can see how important this is. Paul and other early Christian leaders had to figure out how Gentiles could be part of God's covenant people without following the law of Moses. They found the answer in the simple fact that Abraham was the father of many nations, and the doctrinal shift in understanding that it is faith, not works, that brings us to God.

To be part of Abraham's family by faith is to be an inheritor of God's promises and God's family is always bigger than we think. We're the ones who create categories of "us" and "them" and if you've ever been the excluded party you know how painful it is. To be told "there is no place for you here", "your face doesn't fit," or "we don't let people like you in" is incredibly wounding. To be "tolerated" but not really accepted is just as bad. Who wants to be "tolerated"? When God opened the doors in Christ, God blew them open. We are ALL welcome in. We are ALL children of Abraham. We can't earn it. We can't work for it. It just is. We're family. Every race, every nation, every sexual orientation, every gender, every age and all of our different theological understandings. We all come to God through faith, and God does the rest. God is the one who works in us through the Holy Spirit. God is the one who grows us spiritually and changes our lives. Amen.

Genesis 12:1-4

12 The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

2 "I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.

3 I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you."

4 So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran.

Romans 4:1-5; 13-17

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? ² If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. ³ What does Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

⁴ Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. ⁵ However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.

¹³ It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. ¹⁴ For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, ¹⁵ because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

¹⁶ Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. ¹⁷ As it is written: “I have made you a father of many nations.” He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.