

Born of the Spirit
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

¹What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? ²For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³For what does the scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.’ ⁴Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. ⁵But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.

¹³ For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

¹⁶ For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, ¹⁷as it is written, ‘I have made you the father of many nations’)—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

John 3:1-17

¹Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.’ ³Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’ ⁴Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’ ⁵Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above.” ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’ ⁹Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’ ¹⁰Jesus answered him, ‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?’

¹¹ ‘Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ ‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Paul’s style for so much of his writing is as a legal proof, as was common in his day, presenting his case, albeit often poetically, developing his supporting evidence, and providing his conclusion. His supporting evidence always draws on the evidence of the Hebrew faith. Last week in our reading from the letter to the Romans, he drew upon the known example of Adam, comparing him to Christ in order

to prove that Christ is the perfection of creation as had been hoped for, but not carried out by, Adam. Exhibit A this week? This week's reading provides as evidence Abraham, the father of the faith. This week's reading aims to prove that all who believe are children of God, not only those born into the tribe of Israel, into the bloodline of the Hebrews.

Opponents are arguing that for these new followers of Christ to fit in the faith, to be welcomed into the faith, they must be circumcised. Paul argues that actions have never made people the children of God but it is their faith that has. This turns upside down generations of traditions and he must build an extraordinarily strong case to be convincing. And so Paul presents the chronology of events for Abraham: first, "Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Abraham had done nothing to earn his right relationship with God except to be faithful. There were no commandments followed, most evident because there were no commandments in Abraham's time, and yet Abraham was still considered righteous, still given the promise by God that his descendants would be many, that his descendants would be a blessing for all the nations.

Paul is satisfied that this argument is sufficient and so concludes: "For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, **not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham.**" It is okay to follow the law, even right and good, but doing so is not what makes us right with God. Faith alone can do that – faith which is a gift from God, a gift which we must choose to receive. It's here where the reading from Romans dovetails with the reading from John.

"What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit." Note: what is born of the flesh is flesh, **and** what is born of the Spirit is spirit. We often assume a hierarchy here, that what is born of the Spirit is superior to that of the flesh yet the language does not pit them against one another with the word "but." Instead the language is simply "and." It is a fact that what is born of the flesh must be flesh and so the same with the Spirit. These works which we do? Of our own hands? These are of the flesh. The faith which we have? That is of the Spirit. Jesus **does** say that no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit but he is certainly not negating our being born of the flesh. After all, he, too, was born of the flesh, and by choice.

The problem is we prefer the way of the flesh to the detriment of the things of the Spirit. We can count, measure, tally, see our works. Knowing we have served at the Hope Center twice in the last year and contributed "x" amount of dollars to three charitable organizations and given six bags of clothes and other items to Goodwill and even tithed to the church gives us assurance that we are doing the right things. We can look at previous years and know if we are doing more or less; we can compare our

contributions to income ratio; we can even identify where we can improve to be at a level of giving we find acceptable and suitable. **Faith** doesn't have a checklist, particularly Protestant faith.

The Catholic faith allows one to count the number of times one has been to confession against how many times it was offered; it allows you to count how many times you've said the rosary and how many saints to whom you have prayed. There is some comfort in that, in knowing where you stand, but it still doesn't measure your faith. Only God can do that. The Muslim faith allows one to measure one's appointed prayers against the five daily prescribed times; it allows you to count your good deeds and the number of days you have fasted during Ramadan. There is comfort in knowing where you stand, but it still doesn't measure your faith. Only God can do that.

In that way faith is a bit of an enigma – we must have faith that our faith is enough. God measures our faith. To try to measure our own faith means we turn it into works, we try to make it something we control, we apply the rules of the flesh to that which is of the Spirit. Kind of defeats the purpose, wouldn't you say? Instead, faith is something to let go of, to stop trying to manage, and to instead just live. In this way, we loosen our grip, trusting that God will have it. There's a young adult series I've begun to read, which has been developed into a movie series, the first of which happens to be coming out this Friday. The first book is called *Divergent* and the main character is a girl named Tris, living in a post-apocalyptic nation where people's character has been defined into five factions, all of which serve a purpose for society. At a certain age, all youth choose their faction for life, whether they remain in the faction in which they were raised, or they choose another faction. When her time comes, Tris feels she belongs in another faction. Part of the initiation into her chosen faction, Dauntless, is jumping from the top of a building into a dark abyss which the initiates have been told leads to Dauntless headquarters.

There is no form of problem-solving, no alternate route for her to choose. To avoid failing initiation and be turned out as factionless, as one who has nothing to offer society, Tris must give up her control and just jump. Fortunately, God offers far more grace than the factions – we cannot fail at an initiation which doesn't exist and even when we don't give up our efforts to control things, God does not see us as having nothing to offer. But, to fully be in right relationship with God, to be righteous, we do best to give up our control and just jump, to let ourselves be born of the Spirit instead of fighting to remain born only of flesh.

I was at lunch with a clergy colleague this past week and he asked the question of the group gathered around the table, all clergy, how we react to the response of "God will take care of it" from a person whose future appears dire, facing joblessness or other large uncertainties of life. Some replied that we have a part to play in God's plan and we can't leave it all up to God. I certainly agree with this –

we are partners in God's plans for creation. And yet, and yet, I don't think relinquishing control to God is the equivalent of inaction. Indeed, I think that balance, between trusting God and participating in God's creation, is what we as believers strive for – that balance between letting God be God and doing things which praise and thank God in response for God's grace – that balance is righteousness, that balance is right relationship. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: Lord, grant that we may give ourselves over to the Spirit that we might be born to your new way of living, a way of living with full trust in God, we pray. Amen.

2 MINUTES FOR QUIET REFLECTION