

**Sermon: Abraham, For He Is the Father of Us All**  
**Sunday; September 23, 2007**  
**Dundee United Methodist Church**

This morning we are going to continue the sermon series on Paul's letter to the Romans. We have already seen how God's faithfulness is the main theme of this writing. God ushers us into the future by making and keeping promises in covenant relationship and proves unwaveringly faithful. Although Paul traces God's faithfulness throughout scripture, we see this most powerfully in the death and resurrection of Jesus. However, as we saw last week, human beings prove unfaithful. Referring to the ancient story of Adam and Eve, Paul explains how human beings exchange the glory of the immortal God for images of the created order (1:23). Instead of trusting in God, we turn away from Him and try to use other people and things in the world to secure our safety and happiness. Although this dishonors God, we are allowed this liberty. But it is precisely by exercising this freedom apart from covenant faithfulness to God that leads by slight of hand to our eventual slavery to sin and death. In the end, our hearts and minds are so darkened by the practicing of our own filth that we lose the ability to distinguish between right and wrong and cannot even see our own corruption and need.

As a first gesture to remedy the mess that humanity creates, God calls a special people into covenant relationship and gives them the conditions of covenant (Torah) that if followed will lead to blessing and life. In keeping the covenant Israel would also serve as a light unto the nations demonstrating God's love, justice, and faithfulness. But the Jews fail in this calling. Instead of following the Torah in joyful obedience and reaping the reward of blessing and life, they repeatedly break the covenant in pursuit of false gods and prove unfaithful to YHWH. Paul tells these two stories in order to show that all human beings (both Jew and Gentile) stand guilty before God and deserving of death.

The good news is that human unfaithfulness cannot undo God's faithfulness. Paul explains how God saves us from slavery to sin and death and reconciles humanity to Himself in the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. Although this is a divine action that cannot be exhaustively explained, Paul deploys three metaphors to help us understand what God was doing in Jesus: justification, redemption/ransom, and atonement. All of these images make the same point in a different way: God in covenant faithfulness has done everything necessary for us to be forgiven of our sins, reconciled to God, and re-formed in the people that God wants us to be.

The question we face this morning is what is required of fallen human beings if they want to receive this gift of salvation. Some Jewish Christians during Paul's time thought that if Gentiles were to be included in God's saving covenant then the men needed to be circumcised and both men and women were to be instructed in and obedient to the Law. Although this might seem silly to us two-thousand years later, it serves us well to remember that Jesus was a Jew who was recorded as saying that he did not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. All of his disciples were Jewish and his earthly ministry was primarily to Jews. His message was about the Kingdom of God and he was later believed to be the

Jewish Messiah promised by God in the prophets of old. Since all of the first Christians were Jews they came to believe, and rightly so, that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had proven faithful to Israel in Jesus Christ. In fact, this is one of Paul's main arguments in Romans. But if Jesus does not simply dispense with the "old covenant" but somehow fulfills, radically renews, and extends God's covenant faithfulness to all humanity then the question arises as to what remains of previous covenant obligations (which were, after all, originally given by God to Israel as a gift). It only made sense to some Jewish Christians that if Jesus had extended the covenant with Israel to Gentiles that they would need to be circumcised and instructed in the Law like everyone else who had gone before. In order to demonstrate this argument, Jewish Christians pointed to the beginning of the covenant in the story of Abraham: God made covenant with Abraham, Abraham obediently received circumcision as a sign of the covenant, and Abraham was reckoned righteous for this obedience. If Gentiles are to be reckoned righteous, then they too need to obediently submit to God's requirements.

However, Paul says that if our righteousness (and ultimately our salvation) is contingent on human obedience then our future is in grave danger because none are righteous before God and no one has been able to perfectly keep the Law except Jesus. In fact, a closer reading of the Abraham stories shows that Abraham was reckoned righteous not as a result of obedience in circumcision but before he was circumcised because he trusted God—he trusted that God would keep His promises, that God was faithful to His word. And God's unwavering faith in and faithfulness to Abraham engendered Abraham's faithful response. This means that salvation is not grounded in something that we do but in God's covenant faithfulness to us in Jesus Christ that engenders our faithfulness, and since our hope is grounded in God's faithfulness and steadfast love it is as sure as the resurrection of Jesus.

In order to understand this fundamental point in Paul's theology, it might be helpful to reflect on a contemporary story of faith generating faith. One of my favorite all time movies is *Good Will Hunting* starring Matt Damon and Robin Williams. This movie about a twenty year troubled man from south Boston named Will Hunting. During the day he works as a janitor at M.I.T. and during the night he hangs out with friends in local bars drinking, fighting, and picking-up pretty girls. One day when mopping the floor in the Mathematics wing, he notices a complex math problem written on a blackboard in the hall way. Renown Professor Lambeau has challenged all of his students to solve it, confident they could not because it was a problem that has stumped the greatest mathematical minds to ever live. Amazingly, Will solves the problem and leaves the solution on the board for everyone to see. Professor Lambeau could not believe it had been solved, and when he discovered that the young janitor had done what none of his brightest students could do, he was determined to "rescue" him from his blue collar life and train him as a mathematician.

But when he finds Will he is standing before a judge about to receive a jail sentence for being involved in a fight. Professor Lambeau is able to negotiate a deal with the presiding judge by convincing her of his undeveloped genius: The

young janitor can avoid jail time if he agrees to enter counseling and shows up for weekly math lessons with Professor Lambeau. The professor looked at Will and saw the next greatest mathematician, one that he had discovered and would take credit for training. Will showed up for math lessons but did not take them seriously, even to the point of insulting Lambeau. And his therapy sessions were even more disastrous. When he showed up he was often late and then ridiculed each therapist he saw until they refused to see him anymore. To add insult to injury, Lambeau set-up job interviews for Will with prestigious companies only for Will to sabotage with his smart-aleck attitude.

When no other therapist will see Will and Lambeau is at his wits end, he contacts an old classmate named Sean McGuire, a therapist teaching at a community college. After initially resisting, Sean agrees to see Will. He too had a rough life growing up in south Boston, and when he met Will instead of seeing the next greatest mathematician he saw what Will really was, a scared and wounded kid who could not believe in himself or trust others. Unlike Professor Lambeau, he had no ulterior motive for “saving” Will, other than he saw a piece of himself in this tormented young man and had compassion. Just like with the other therapists, Will began sessions with Sean acting as if it were a waste of his time and he didn’t need help from anybody, especially a shrink. Will showed up late, was a smart-aleck, and even made an inappropriate comment about Sean’s deceased wife that was almost a deal breaker. But Sean never stopped believing in Will, and this created a safe enough space for Will to drop his defenses and have a breakthrough in therapy. What we discover is that Will has been passed from one abusive foster home to another. He couldn’t trust himself or others because those who were supposed to protect him violated his body, mind, and spirit in atrocious ways. What he needed to heal and change was not higher standards of performance or conditional support but for someone to believe in him. Whereas Professor Lambeau’s efforts led Will to run farther away, Sean’s faith in him allowed Will to have faith in himself and other people. Sean’s faith elicited Will’s faith.

Something similar happens to Abraham. God promised Abraham that he would have a son and that through this son God would make his ancestors as numerous as the stars of the sky and bless the world through covenant relationship with them. But Abraham was one hundred years old and his body was as good as dead in terms of producing children. Sarah was also elderly and her womb was as good as dead from bearing children. So in this promise to Abraham God was essentially promising to make that which is dead alive. Abraham could not believe this at first, but God was faithful even when Abraham took matters into his own hands by sleeping with his servant girl Hagar to secure a male heir. It was precisely because God had proven trustworthy in the past and remained faithful in the present that Abraham could come to trust God and even hope against all hope. It was this trust in God’s trustworthiness that made Abraham righteous. And according to Paul, we are made righteous not by what we do but by trusting in God, which is itself a divine gift engendered in us by God’s own faithfulness.

What the question boils down to is this: are we saved by something that we do or are we saved by trusting in something that God does for us, something that God offers as a gift? This is the old question of salvation by works or by faith. And this is still a relevant question for Christians today. Human beings seem to have a tenacious compulsion for making salvation a matter of following a prescribed list of moral rules. But Paul is unequivocal and his claim is nothing short of radical: we are saved only because God is faithful and graciously offers salvation as a free gift, and we are included in covenant relationship with God, which has been fulfilled, renewed, and extended to all by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, by trusting that what God did in Jesus is all that is enough. That the empty cross illuminated by the light bursting from the empty tomb proves that God is trustworthy, that our hope is sure when we entrust our lives to Him, and that he is able to bring us from slavery to sin and death to new life characterized by peace and joy. But we must remember that even the trust place in God that enables us to receive the gift of salvation is itself a gift that is engendered in us by God's faithfulness.

I would like to conclude by sharing a definition of faith that I find very compelling. Jim Wallis says that faith is about trusting God when all the evidence points to the contrary and watching the evidence change. It's being able to hope against hope because God has been faithful in the past and will be faithful in the present and the future. And not only is God faithful but God is able to bring life out death. We see this in the resurrection that happens in Abraham's loins and Sarah's womb. We see it on a cool Sunday afternoon when a couple of women on their way to anoint a dead body find an empty grave. We can trust God because God is faithful and has the power to enact a resurrection even in the deadest regions of our hearts and lives. You can believe in God because God believes in you. Do you trust Him?