

sermon-2/17/08 Newport Pres. Church
“It’s Not About Us”
Gen. 12:1-4 and Rom. 4:1-5, 13-17

When Paul became a Christian he had to come to terms with how Gentiles could become Christians without first becoming Jews. You can read about the argument he had with Peter and the Jerusalem Council in the book of Acts. That argument seems strange to our ears. It has little relevance in our day.

If we take a closer look at the situation the early church faced, however, and Paul’s argument for including Gentiles in the Church, like the one here in our Romans passage, it is a good thing Paul had to wrestle with this issue. His solution to this seeming dilemma opens up some interesting points that are quite relevant to us in our walk of faith two thousand years later.

The Abraham story in Genesis captured Paul’s imagination and heart. In trying to understand it, he saw a way into accepting Gentiles into Christianity even though they were not circumcised.

Many of us know the Abraham story. It comes right after the Tower of Babel story in Genesis eleven. The world was in a shambles. People were divided because they did not speak the same language any more. We understand that world. Sadly, even though we speak the same language in our country, technically speaking, we find ourselves unable to understand one another when it comes to politics, social issues or matters of theology. We live in a Tower of Babel world today!

Into to this fractured world Genesis tells the story of Abraham. This man heard God’s call to get up and leave family and homeland so he could receive the land God would show him. That, in itself, just boggles the mind. Leaving family and homeland in that day was very rare. It took an enormous amount of trust for Abraham to obey the promptings of that inner voice he felt was from God.

But, later on in the story, the amount of trust needed just gets bigger. God tells Abraham that he was going to have children. Abraham was almost 100 years old at the time. Paul says later on in Romans 4 that Abraham’s body was as good as dead! His wife Sarah was barren. Her womb was dead, in other words.

But Abraham trusted God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. All of this happened before Abraham was circumcised, before he was officially part of the chosen people, before the law was given. That was very crucial to Paul’s argument to accept Gentiles into the Church.

Abraham became the father of all who have faith or trust in God, not just the father of those who obeyed the law. Paul could affirm that because Abraham’s relationship with God was not based on obedience to the law. There were no Ten Commandments at that

time. It was based on his trust that God could bring hope, new life, and possibilities out of death.

Paul elevates Abraham's trust to a very high level. He says that Abraham's ability to trust that God could bring life out of death, in terms of children, was similar to God bringing life out of death in terms of the resurrection of Jesus. One commentator I read even said Paul was affirming Abraham, in that sense, had a resurrection faith.

Paul pushes this idea that we are made righteous by faith and not by obedience to any law to great levels. If we are justified by God because of obedience to some law, then faith would not enter the equation. Our justification would be like being paid a wage. We earned it by our obedience.

My guess would be that most of us would deny we believe that. We call that works righteousness. We are saved by grace not by works. But, on a very practical level, we act as if we can earn God's love and grace by our obedience. We think we should at least try to be obedient. When we fail, we should ask for forgiveness. If we do that God has to save us.

But Paul will have none of that. He says God even justifies the ungodly! Go back and read Romans 4:5. That was absolutely revolutionary in his day. He was going against Old Testament passages that said God punishes the ungodly, not justifies them. The grace Paul is affirming here knows no bounds.

Paul's God justifies anyone God wants to justify at God's own pleasure. Apparently it pleases God to justify us, to forgive us, even when we are jerks. That puts justification out of our control. We can't control God by our behavior, by our obedience. There is no quid pro quo here.

But it goes deeper than that. Many Christians have proclaimed we are saved by faith, not by works, and then turned around and made faith another work. Maybe it would be more accurate to say we have made belief a work. We think if we believe the right things God will forgive and save us. We hate to leave eternity up to God. We want to control God by our faith.

As one commentator says, faith is not another work that earns righteousness. She writes, "Abraham's trust in God reflects the state in which he receives God's declaration, not the condition or requirement for receiving it."

It is not finally about us at all. It is about this profligate God who justifies, who forgives, who saves us, just because it gives God pleasure. The grace being affirmed here is radical and free. It is certainly out of our control. It is a huge mistake to make faith just another work to prove we deserve God's favor.

When we truly trust this God who reaches out to us even before we trust, we can go along for the ride. And when we do, we may find, as one scholar put it, that God brings into

life parts of our lives that have been dead or unproductive. When Paul writes that God calls into existence things that do not exist, he is affirming that nothing is impossible with God. There are possibilities for our lives we can't even imagine.

When we can trust a God as gracious as that, out of gratitude we end up obeying the voice of God calling us to acts that sometimes require great courage. It is so much more graceful to obey God out of gratitude than to obey God trying to earn our salvation.

In my last church I had a man who couldn't stand this radical grace. He says if we take away the threat of hell for those who don't believe the right things or who don't obey, then why would anyone want to come to church?

I wanted to say to him if going to church was like going to the dentist, if it was some painful thing one endures so that one could have fire insurance in the next life, then I don't want to trust a God who would require that. And, I would not want to go to a church that made worship such a chore! I may even have said something like that to him, but it only made him more angry.

This Lent, let's try to get the order straight. Grace comes first, then trusting and obedience. Let us open ourselves to God's grace and see what new life God can bring out of the dead places in our lives. Let us open ourselves to the new possibilities God's Spirit can empower in us, some of which we did not even know were there! Have a great ride. Amen