

Before the Law

Presbyterian Church of New Rochelle

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For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners,
so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. (John 5:19)

One of Paul's great contributions to the Reformation was his insight that justification comes through faith and not works; faith is not earned, it is a gift. As we have said, not for the last time in this quincentenary of the Reformation, this doctrine had a profound impact on Martin Luther. It is one of the theological distinctions between the reformed church and the Western Orthodox or Roman Catholic church. The idea that a Creator God who could cast the heavens and all of its stars through infinite space; create complex ecosystems with seemingly infinite flora and fauna, and give sentience to humankind created in God's own image conveyed power beyond our imagination. That a God with such vast power would so eagerly forgive and be so generously gracious is so contrary to human nature as to be unbelievable. And indeed, it was a tough sell to first century Jewish scribes who thought it on the verge of heresy. But in Romans, his theological magnum opus, Paul makes a thorough and powerful case.

We have noted more than once that when Matthew wants to underscore a point he recalls Moses, the liberator of God's chosen people. Paul's "go to" person is more likely to be Abraham, the patriarch, the progenitor of the three monotheistic or Abrahamic religions. And so he does in this morning's epistle reading where Paul brings together two of his recurring sermon themes: faith and the law. We might also say faith v works for it seems that in Paul's mind the basis of good works was keeping the law.

By going all the way back to the beginning, to God's first intervention with humankind since the flood, Paul is setting up a very clever argument that the Pharisees could not convincingly counter. Perhaps we can't say with absolute certainty that Abraham

was the first to be tapped on the shoulder by God. But we can say that Abraham was the first to listen to God and accept God's every command without hesitation or complaint. He relocates his family more than once, rescues his nephew, and nearly takes the life of Isaac his precious, long-awaited son, all at God's command. It was Abraham's unquestioning and unwavering faith, his right relationship with God, that merited God's grace and the covenant that he would be the "ancestor of a multitude of nations." Not *just* because it is women's month, I think we must also acknowledge Sarah's faith; I mean what wife would go wandering around the desert far from the people she knew because her husband heard a voice?!

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The distinction Paul is laboring to make is that the gift of grace must never be confused with earnings or wages. If we do a day's work planting or harvesting or delivering a baby by C-section or arguing before the court, we expect a day's wages to be paid. Paul posits that if obedience to the law is the basis of righteousness or justification, how was it that Abraham received God's blessing centuries before the law was handed down to Moses? Indeed, we might ask, why did God choose Israel to be his chosen people? While that question is well beyond the scope of this morning's conversation, it is enduring evidence of God's abiding love and generosity.

I hope you share with me the enhanced intensity of this topic – faith – simply because it is Lent. The

concept of God's grace necessarily becomes more focused, more relevant as we make our Lenten journey toward the Cross, and as we hear Bonhoeffer's haunting reminder about the cost of that grace which nevertheless, is so freely given. Faith, as personified in Abraham then, is unquestioning obedience to God's will for us.

Last week in our conversation about sin, Calvin advised that it was of absolute necessity that we be self-aware and honest in our appraisal of ourselves. If we acknowledge we are sinners, why are so many endowed with an indefatigably transcendent self-image? I am thinking about attitudes that go well beyond a positive self-image; beyond knowing one's capabilities and being prepared. This sense of self goes well beyond the notion that if God is with us who can be against us? Scripture never says life will always be a cakewalk – life is filled with challenges. Faith is believing that God is with us as we face them.

We mustn't close without a word regarding what is undoubtedly the most oft' quoted text in Scripture. John 3:16 is the beginning and the end of grace; it is unassailable proof of God's love for humanity. It was the very heart of Paul's understanding of the Good News. Curiously, the Lectionary combines it with the preceding 15 verses that introduce us to Nicodemus, a Pharisee who is comically literal in his understanding of the mystery that is the Great Jehovah. We might say there is no poetry in Nicodemus. But let us not forget that in John's telling of Jesus' ministry he visits Jerusalem more than once for the Passover. In this morning's reading, Nicodemus has come to see him just hours after Jesus made a whip of cords to drive out the money changers and those selling animals for sacrifice. Earlier that day, Jesus poured out their coins and overturned their tables exclaiming "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

Christ's encounter with Nicodemus reminds us that as we look back to first century Palestine we applaud the Nicodemuses who were able to keep an open mind, who were able to see Christ as the Son of Man. We are also reminded how challenging the calling is.

What does it mean to be born of water and Spirit? What does it mean to die in order to have new life? In the modern era, are we not called to examine these mysteries; to also keep an open mind? Are we not called to listen for the prophets of our own time? Nicodemus and Abraham also show us that we are to be active in pursuing our faith, willing to take-on new jobs or responsibilities, be intellectually curious to explore new ways of understanding our faith.

At a recent interfaith gathering the evening's topic was faith. It was led by someone that had recently received his PhD in interfaith studies. It was well attended and all major faiths were well represented. Toward the end of our time together we were led in an exercise where we were to close our eyes and recall a moment in our lifetimes where we felt helpless, at risk, perhaps frightened. We were asked to recall how the situation resolved itself and whether there was an individual or other focal point that was key to the resolution. One woman recalled being at a gathering of friends when her young son, eating pistachio nuts for the first time, had a violent allergic reaction. His tongue soon swelled to grotesque proportions and there was real concern that he would suffocate. They called 911 immediately and were told it would be 10 minutes before they could get to their location. The mother is a medical doctor and she knew that 10 minutes might very well be too long. Happily the emergency medical team arrived in time and her son's life was saved. She described the intensity of her prayers and her thankfulness that God had allowed her son to live. She said it affirmed her faith. It was a moving story we will all remember for some time.

As we were about to conclude the conversation, a first-time attendee raised her hand to speak. She asked the mother, "What would you have done if your son had died?" The woman answered slowly in a low almost shaky voice, "I don't know." The new person continued with equal intensity that suggested she had experienced precisely that type of shattering disappointment in her own life. She said, "I have found that the only way I can deal with events of such extreme emotional intensity is

complete submission. The only way I can survive is putting my life completely in God's hands."

In a Lenten reflection, Philip Yancey wrote: "To some, the image of a pale body glimmering on a dark night whispers of defeat. What good is a God who does not control his Son's suffering? What possible good could such a God do for us? But the louder sound can be heard: the shout of a God crying out to man, "I love you." Love was compressed for all history in that lonely, bleeding figure. Jesus, who said he could call down the Angels at any moment and rescue himself from the horror, chose not to – because of us." For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, to die for us so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Rich Lenten blessings to you all,

Amen