***A GOOD RELATIONSHIP***

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Texts: Genesis 11:27-12:4 and Romans 4:1-5, 13-25

At the memorial service for my dad a few weeks ago I saw people from across my life, some of whom I had not seen in years. I saw siblings, nieces and nephews. I saw cousins who now live across the country and friends from high school who never left western PA. I saw folks who were like second parents to me when I was growing up and friends who were part of our church family in my youth. I saw some total strangers who I knew by name only and some I didn’t know at all. I saw familiar faces from this congregation who offered their love and support from the same oak pews in which I sat as a child. It is a complex web of relationships that we weave across the years; family, friends, and total strangers move in and out of our lives, and then at a funeral or wedding or some other special occasion they converge, and we are reminded of how much of our lives are shaped by relationships.

What relationships shape your life – who you’ve been, who you are, who you may yet be? Psychologists will tell you that your family of origin, especially the relationship with your parents, has a great impact on who you are and how you view the world – both positively and negatively. A good relationship will make you feel loved and supported; a bad relationship may leave you beaten down or looking for love in all the wrong places. Sometimes a teacher steers your life in a new direction or opens new possibilities that you never thought possible. A good mentor may shape your life in an unexpected way. As one friend told me a couple of weeks ago, “I am the man I am today because of your father.” And so am I! Who has been that kind of positive influence for you? Who has made you the good person you are today? There are also toxic influences – a bully, an abusive spouse, a friend who betrays you – that may leave you scarred, scorned, scared, or perhaps stronger for having weathered the storm they created. What relationships – positive or negative – have shaped your life in the past? What relationships are shaping you now?

The Bible is full of stories of relationships between spouses, within families, among God’s people, between God’s people and other peoples, but most importantly between God and all of humankind. God creates us to be in relationship with one another, but God also creates us to be in relationship with God. Why those relationships are so important to God is a divine mystery, though perhaps it has something to do with the nature of God and the Trinity. How we navigate those relationships with family, friends, enemies, strangers, and God is a measure of our faithfulness to who God created us to be and is the subject of Jesus’ teaching and example for us as the Son of God who is the messiah of God.

In the passage from Genesis that we read this morning we find a living illustration of the kind of relationship that God longs to have with us. It is the kind of relationship God has with Abram. Abram is the son of Terah, husband to Sarai, brother to Nahor, and uncle to Lot. The writer lays out that family tree as if to say that Abram is not much different from the rest of us. He is living in Haran where his father settled after uprooting the family from their hometown of Ur in order to relocate to Canaan. For some reason they got no further than Haran and decided that was as good a place to settle as any. So there they lived, and there Abram’s father died at the ripe old age of 205, give or take a century or so. And there the story begins – with no commentary on Abram’s character or accomplishments or encounters with God, no description of his demeanor, only this – Sarai was barren and had no child, which seems irrelevant but, as we all know, will prove significant.

Out of the blue God comes to Abram and says, “Pack up your tents and go to the place I will show you. I will make of you a great nation. I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing to all the families of the earth.” It is not the first time God has come to someone with a divine directive. Earlier in Genesis God comes to Noah and tells him to build an ark, but there we are told that Noah was a righteous man while the rest of the world was a bunch of dirty rotten scoundrels with whom the Lord had lost all patience. There is a reason for God’s action and for God’s choice of Noah. But we have no such insight with regard to Abram, no explanation for God’s choice of him, no reason for this command to pick up and leave all that is familiar to go to an undisclosed location. It is simply the will of God, and says the text, “Abram went as the Lord had told him.”

At the heart of this relationship between God and Abram is obedience borne of absolute unquestioning, life-changing trust. Abram doesn’t hesitate, equivocate or vacillate, he just goes. He doesn’t ask for details about *why* he is going or directions for *where* he is going or a time *when* he is going or *who* exactly is sending him. He just goes. He goes because God told him to go, and he apparently trusts in this God with not only his life, but also his future. Because he goes, Christians and Jews and Muslims around the globe trace their religious lineage to Father Abraham and to his God. There are bumps along the way – nephew Lot gets Palm Springs and Abram gets Death Valley, no baby appears for a long time and the old couple gets impatient, when the son finally arrives God asks Abram to sacrifice him and then rescues the boy at the last moment. But through thick and thin Abram remains faithful, Abram remains righteous!

In the pages of Scripture that word*, righteous*, describes one’s good relationship with God and with one another. It is far removed from its linguistic kin, *self-righteous*, which suggests a holier-than-thou attitude. Righteousness, by contrast, is God-centered. It is getting it right, not in one’s own eyes, but in God’s eyes. Frederick Buechner describes it this way:

*“You haven’t got it* ***right****!” says the exasperated piano teacher. Junior is holding his hands the way he’s been told. His fingering is unexceptionable. He has memorized the piece perfectly. He has hit all the proper notes with deadly accuracy. But his heart’s not in it, only his fingers. What he’s playing is a sort of music but nothing that will start voices singing or feet tapping. He has succeeded in boring everybody to death including himself….Righteousness is getting it all* ***right****. If you play it the way it’s supposed to be played, there shouldn’t be a still foot in the house*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

It is that kind of rhythm to life, a rhythm that engages heart, mind, body, soul and spirit in obedient love for God that characterizes a righteous person and a righteous community. It is a life whose aim is true – true to who God creates us to be. It is that righteous life, that good relationship with God and one another, to which we are called as the people of God. But it is much easier said than done.

In his letter to the Romans Paul addresses this issue with a young church trying to figure out what a righteous life looks like. A prevalent idea seemed to be that righteousness was earned by good works; we are made righteous by the good things we do and upon being found righteous we are blessed. It is a concept that has long and deep roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition – the idea that somehow we earn God’s good favor by our good deeds. Yet as Paul points out, Abraham was reckoned as righteous before he did any good deeds, before the law had been handed down to direct his life, before there was a clear path of expectation for his behavior. Abraham’s righteousness was rooted in his trust for God, trust that was expressed in those three little words, “So Abram went.” Abraham didn’t go in order to earn God’s blessing. Abram went because he believed in God, believed in what God said, believed in what God promised, believed in what God asked of him. The starting point for a righteous life is faith, trusting in the God who created us and calls us to be righteous people.

Throughout Lent we are using for our Statement of Faith the 1st question of the Heidelberg Catechism. The 60th question of that catechism is this: *How are you righteous before God?* The answer it offers is this:

*Only by true faith in Jesus Christ. In spite of the fact that my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God, and have not kept any one of them, and that I am still ever prone to all that is evil, nevertheless, God, without any merit of my own, out of grace, grants me the benefits of the perfect expiation of Christ, imputing to me his righteousness and holiness as if I had never committed a single sin or had ever been sinful, having fulfilled myself and all the obedience which Christ has carried out for me, if only I accept such favor with a trusting heart.*

Grace, faith, trust, Christ – these are the watchwords of righteousness. We are made righteous by grace through faith, not by our own good deeds. The starting point for a good relationship with God and with one another is faith in God, trust in God that dares to believe God’s promises, accept God’s love, and so follow God’s commands not in order to earn God’s good favor but rather in gratitude for the blessings God has already showered upon us. Trust is not the endpoint of a righteous life; it is the starting point.

What does a righteous life look like? It looks like Abram pulling up his tent pegs to go he knows not where. It looks like Mary kneeling before Gabriel and saying, “Let it be with me according to your word.” It looks like Jesus on the cross saying, “Forgive them for they know not what they do.” It looks like John Newton penning the words to *Amazing Grace* as he set free slaves from his slave-ship. It looks like my mom newly diagnosed with a brain tumor, saying, “Whether I live or die it will be okay.” It looks like Crystal Gosnell getting on a plane to Nigeria to begin work at an orphanage. And maybe, just maybe, it looks sometimes like you and me. Amen

1. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Harper & Row: San Francisco, 1973, p.82 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)