

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
August 7, 2022 – The 9th Sunday after Pentecost
Genesis 15:1-6; Psalm 33:12-22; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40
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This morning's lessons speak about faith, about trusting God's Word and God's promises, even when from the human viewpoint they seem impossible. In the lesson from Genesis we read about God's promise to Abram (later renamed Abraham) that he would have descendants as numerous as the stars in heaven. The commentary in the Letter to the Hebrews makes it clear how absurd that promise was from a human point of view. Abram was old. His wife Sarai was old and barren. But because Abram trusted God's promise, because he believed that God would be faithful, "therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born."

The passage from Genesis makes a very important point about faith. Abram "believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." In other words, Abram "corrected" his vision to be in line with God's vision, his will to be in line with God's will. That is what it means to be righteous. This isn't a simple matter of believing in something in spite of the evidence. We might call that "wishful thinking" or even "denial." What scripture is talking about is profound trust in a person, in this case the personal God who has made a promise to Abram, even when the promise seems unlikely.

Part of trusting in someone is believing his or her word, relying on the truth of what he or she says. We might ask ourselves how much we trust God. How deep is our faith in God's promises? Do we trust God's vision for humanity so completely that we are willing to align our vision with God's vision, our will with God's will? We pray in the Lord's Prayer, "your kingdom come, your will be done." Do we mean those words? Or are our actions proving that what we are really interested in is our will? Another part of trusting is having faith in the trustworthiness of someone. Do we believe so completely in the goodness of God and the love of God that we can align ourselves with God's goodness and love, in our behavior and in our attitude?

In the new issue of "The Coracle" I mentioned recalling questions posed by one of my professors in seminary. The course was on social justice and the Bible. In a discussion about faith and trust, the professor put these questions to the students: "what do you bet your life on?" and "how does your life reflect your choice?" In last week's reading from Luke's Gospel – The Parable of the Rich Fool – Jesus gives an example of betting your life on the wrong choice. In the parable a rich man's land produces a rich harvest. What will he do with his abundant crops? He decides to build bigger barns so that he can hoard his grain and his goods. He is pleased with this strategy and speaks to his soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." The Rich Fool bet his life on his riches – we can tell that from his behavior and his attitude – and Jesus effectively says, "Bad choice!"

Jesus was a Jewish rabbi teaching mostly Jewish people. We may assume that the rich man in the parable is a Jew. That means that he would be familiar with biblical teaching regarding wealth. He would know that abundance is meant to be shared with the poor and needy. So, the rich man in Jesus' parable knew better than to hoard his wealth. He knew that an alternative to building bigger barns to hold his crops was to share them with the hungry. He knew what choice God called him to make and he deliberately turned away from God's way. So, God speaks, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" Jesus comments, "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

Faith can be defined as trust in God and for Christians, in Jesus Christ. Idolatry is trusting what is not God, putting something other than God in God's rightful place. That is why St. Paul writes in his letter to the Colossians that greed is idolatry. In other words, greed – a selfish desire to acquire or possess more than one needs – amounts to putting possessions and wealth in God's rightful place. Idolatry is absolutely prohibited in the first two of the Ten Commandments. "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of bondage. You shall have no other gods but me. You shall not make for yourself any idol."

The clear message of this morning's scripture readings is that we are meant to trust God and God's promises. We are meant to have faith. For some people, those who have been given what we might call a "gift of faith," that is simple and straightforward. But for most of us, this kind of deep trust in God does not always feel "natural" or easy. Perhaps that is why scripture so often exhorts us to have faith. After all, we don't need constant reminders to do something we already do without effort. We need constant encouragement to do those good things which are challenging for us. Having radical faith in God and God's promises can be deeply challenging, especially when we feel overwhelmed by the evil in the world or the troubles in our lives.

So, how do we grow in faith? How do we nurture our trust in God? One route to that end is to look back at our own lives to see how God has already loved us and provided for us and shown us mercy. This may be easiest to see when we consider our times of greatest trouble, those times when we have known how much we need God. Did God provide what you needed through someone else? Or did God give you the strength to carry on within yourself? One of my favorite Gospel songs is called "Strong Again," and this line always strikes me as so profound: "Sometimes I surprise myself with the strength that God gave me." Or did God bless you with the assurance of God's presence and love, an assurance which carried you through?

Perhaps when you look back at your life, you can see how God helped you to do God's will when doing so was more than you were capable of on your own. Has God helped you to forgive someone that you were unable to forgive? Has God moved you to be generous or kind beyond the bounds of your own character? Has God filled your heart with compassion for someone you had disregarded or for whom you had contempt?

The prophet Ezekiel wrote this in God's voice, with this promise to God's people: "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you; ... and you shall be my people, and I will be your God" (Ezekiel 36:27-28).

In the portion of Luke's Gospel that we heard today, Jesus tells his disciples that they need not be afraid because of God's promise: "it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." If we trust God's promise deeply, then we will find the strength and courage to do what Jesus told his disciples to do in the verse preceding our lesson: "strive for God's kingdom" (Luke 12:31). Jesus exhorts us to strive for God's kingdom, without fear or worry, but with trust in God and in the fact that it is "[our] Father's good pleasure to give [us] the kingdom."

The kingdom – God's kingdom – where love rules our hearts, where sin and selfishness no longer stand in the way of our becoming the beloved children of God we are called to be, where our love flows freely to God, our neighbors and ourselves, true love, good, nourishing, life-giving love, love received and returned forever. This is the kingdom promised to us by God, through our Savior, Jesus Christ. May God's promises and God's love so deepen our trust in God that we will bet our lives on nothing less. In Jesus' name. Amen.