

Genesis 17:1-7; 15-16

¹ When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. ² Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.”

³ Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, ⁴ “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. ⁵ No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶ I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. ⁷ I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.

¹⁵ God also said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. ¹⁶ I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.”

Romans 4:13-25

¹³ It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. ¹⁴ For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, ¹⁵ because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

¹⁶ Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. ¹⁷ As it is written: “I have made you a father of many nations.” He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.

¹⁸ Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” ¹⁹ Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah’s womb was also dead. ²⁰ Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, ²¹ being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. ²² This is why “it was credited to him as righteousness.” ²³ The words “it was credited to him” were written not for him alone, ²⁴ but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. ²⁵ He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

Mark 8:27-38

²⁷ Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?”

²⁸ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

²⁹ “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.”

³⁰ Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷ Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ³⁸ If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

“The Rule of Law and the Role of Love”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“I have decided to follow Jesus. NO turning back; no turning back.” We are still at the beginning of our Lenten journey, and I want to invite us to think about how we are walking with Jesus during this time.

I know that there are essentially two main ideas running through what I want to share today, and while I first thought to use one next week, and the other today, eventually I came to understand that the tension between the ideas is just the point I hope to make. We have decided to follow Jesus, and we want to know what that looks like, with the same kind of discomfort that Peter and the other disciples must

have had when Jesus told them that there would be suffering involved in the journey. Part of our discomfort may be in wanting more definitive tasks to perform in order to get this discipleship business right. Or, our discomfort might come from having heard just exactly what we are supposed to do, but finding it tremendously difficult.

I wonder if any of you have seen the bumper sticker I have noticed on more than one car: "the Bible said it; I believe it; that settles it." Theology represented in bumper stickers . . . I suppose some of my past car stickers more certainly proclaimed my Christian faith than do my current college names and Fiddle Camp memorabilia. It used to be that I had a peace sign, and a little fish, that is before my car seized up and I bought a new one. I wanted the fish because it reminds me that Christianity is very subversive. It turns things upside down, beginning with the law. We move from a rule of law to a rule of love. We move from a path of law to a path of love; from deeds to grace; from doing to believing. And then, from faith again to doing, loving, as we walk with Jesus.

There is a story told among Zen Buddhists about a nun who one day approached a great patriarch to ask if he had any insight into the Nirvana sutra she had been reading.

"I am illiterate," the man replied, "but perhaps if you could read the words to me I could understand the truth that lies behind them." Incredulous, the nun responded, "If you do not know even the characters as they are written in the text, then how can you expect to know the truth to which they point?"

Patently the patriarch offered his answer, which has become a spiritual maxim for the ages: "Truth has nothing to do with words. Truth can be likened to the bright

moon in the sky. Words, in this case, can be likened to a finger. The finger can point to the moon's location. However, the finger is not the moon. To look at the moon, it is necessary to gaze beyond the finger, right?" My thanks to Daniel G. Deffenbaugh for this illustration, which he offers as part of a commentary on today's lesson from Paul's letter. He goes on to say, "The law has always been a means of pointing the way toward God, an instrument that helps us to know and do the divine will. As such it is meant to liberate. But when the means is mistaken for an end in itself, the consequence can be a state of spiritual confusion in which all hope is obscured. The moon slips behind the clouds and only an insufficient finger remains. We then grasp at straws, redefining our world in ever simpler terms -- us and them, insiders and outsiders -- until we eventually reach the depths of our own private hell."

We do grasp at straws, don't we? We want to hang onto anything that will make us feel certain and sure. We want to have lines drawn not in sand, but in stone. Sometimes in doing so, we kick up a sandstorm, or feel like we've thrown stones or had them thrown at us. With something as important as our spirituality, as our relationship with God at stake, we want certainty, and we want to make that certainty something we can control. At the center of what we learn from Paul today is that all of our certainty rests with God, in Christ.

We have a wonderful example of faith, of *trust in God* in the story of Abraham and Sarah. Surely it was no easy task to leave everything behind—even one's named identity. Surely it was no easy task to obey God's requests for what to do on the human side of covenant. Still, Abraham packs up his family and goes. He goes without looking back. No turning back. And he goes, believing that God will make good on God's side of the covenant. And we are on this side of those

promises, knowing that God *has* made good. And the generations that follow continued to look toward a Messiah, and the Messiah has found us.

I'm sure, though, that there were plenty of times when Abraham's faith might have wobbled a bit. I like what Anne Lamott has to say about faith. "I have a lot of faith. But I am also afraid a lot, and have no real certainty about anything. I remembered something Father Tom had told me--that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns."

So, what if we do have faith? Is this enough to help us walk comfortably, certainly with Jesus this Lent? Is faith enough to make us pick up whatever crosses lie in our path; to have us take on suffering? Sure, we do not have the same rule of law when we have grace that comes from God; that we receive in faith. Still, Jesus tells us that to walk with him, we have to pick up the cross. What would you say if I told you that I think in some ways, love itself can be both the greatest gift, and the greatest cross? You see, to love well requires a great deal of us. There is a lot of sacrifice involved in loving well.

What do we **do**, if we don't **do what the law told us**? We love—through acts of justice; through mercy and forgiveness. **We act**, seemingly blindly, if we consider ourselves blind if we don't pay attention to how our actions will be viewed; by their "success rate," and instead by their correct rate. Are they loving? Are we trusting that God will make things right? There is a lot of letting go that happens in loving. We let go of control when we do for someone else; when we feel for someone else. There is a lot of letting go in acts of mercy; in working for justice.

But let's look at an even closer example of justice and mercy. There's a lot of letting go that happens in forgiving. When we forgive someone, we stop thinking about whether the other party will ever make things right with us. When we forgive someone, we give over our anger, our sense of being wronged, and we trust that God, only God, can make things right. We have faith that God's way of having us be in the world is more important than any stance we might take individually. If someone has harmed you, let it go. This *doesn't* mean that we hang on very tightly to the hope that God will enact vengeance in our honor. This means that we let go; we give to God the hurt and the anger, and we eventually move to ask a blessing on the other.

And acts of mercy? While we may think of angels somehow, as we spoke of a couple of weeks ago, or we may think of doctors and nurses performing feats of healing, mercy is often on a larger scale. What are we doing to make sure that there are no hungry children in the world? What are we doing to make sure that there is no one without a home? You may at this point be wondering how all of these things have anything to do with the named title of this sermon, or of a connection between following Jesus, and this rule of law and role of love.

I want to say this very simply: It's all very hard without faith; it's impossible without grace. We may have faith that things can change in this world, but without God helping us along the way, it's impossible. God's people have followed to the best of their ability all the laws that God provided for them to relate with one another well, and with God. Still, we continued to blow it. We still continue to blow it. We carry grudges; we are spiteful. We look to our own needs and ignore the needs of others. We are so sure that we are right, even about matters of God,

who is ultimately beyond our complete understanding, that we act violently against those who don't believe what we believe. We say, "that settles it," instead of "how do you feel?"

Still, there is always hope that we may be better; may love well. There is always hope, because there is always God, and God is good all the time, even when we are not. Those who decide to follow Jesus have a new law—a law of love. The role of love in this world is something we may not have seen on a global scale, but we certainly see it intimately, even here in this church. I see it when I hear each of you sharing delightedly about others' getting their vaccinations, and about our desire to again welcome guests of the Simmering Pot; I see and hear it when so many of you have asked me how others among us are doing. You love each other enough to ask. We learn about the rule of love when we read that Jesus loved us so much that he died for us. What will we do to say thank you. What can we do to follow him? There is nothing that we *have* to do. God does it for us. Still, we live in this world that is so broken; that carries so much pain and suffering. What can we do to help someone else carry some of it? It may not be that we have to be someone's angel, exactly. Still, whose cross might we bear? On our own, probably not a lot. Together with God, oh so much. God offers continually to walk with us. That's the gift of grace, and we can take it or leave it. We can try to get things right, and ultimately fail because there are not enough laws in the world to help us curb our sinful selves. And then there is Jesus.

Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less. Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more. But we can always love others more. Thanks be to God! Amen.