

Being Right with God

Recently a friend gave me a book called *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths* by Bruce Feiler. Feiler was raised a Jew but as an adult had drifted away from the practice of his religion. Eventually he wanted to learn more about it, and especially about this mysterious person Abraham, whom three world religions consider their founder: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Feiler devotes an entire chapter to the passage we heard this morning, the call of Abraham. He emphasizes that Abraham came from a polytheistic culture, one that had many gods, yet Abraham himself became a monotheist, believing in *one* God. That set him apart from all of his ancestors. What's even more remarkable is that Abraham believed in this one God before he saw any proof. Unlike his descendant Moses, he experienced no burning bushes, plagues, or tablets of stone. God simply spoke to Abraham, and he believed.

Because he believed, Abraham is blessed. The blessing is also remarkable. For one thing, God promised to make of him a great nation, even though he and Sarah were old and had no children. The blessing also extended well beyond him. Not only would Abraham himself be blessed, but all the families of the earth would be blessed through him as well. The early Christians picked up on this universal application as their faith expanded from Jews to Gentiles.

St. Paul was particularly taken by the utter faith of Abraham. Because Abraham was an ancestor of Moses, that faith long predated the coming of the Law or Torah. God called; Abraham acted. That's the essence of faith, Paul said. Abraham *believed* God. That's what made him right with God, what gave him righteousness. Abraham's faith came through the grace of God, grace that has been available to everyone since, including you and me. Paul argued that if righteousness came through what we do, through works, then it would be like payment for a job, like wages. It would be earned. But we can't earn righteousness; grace is a free gift.

Yet we still have to *accept* God's grace even if we don't *earn* it. It's remarkable how difficult that can be. Sometimes people think they have to be *worthy* of God's grace. They say they are too sinful, or not faithful enough, or have scruples that keep them accepting grace. But isn't that the same thing as trying to earn grace? "Oh, I won't be worthy of God's grace unless I do such-and-such" is just the flip side of "I've done such-and-such so now I've earned God's grace." God *knows* that we can never earn it. God knows we will never be worthy of grace. But that's not what grace means. Grace is a gift freely given. One earns grace no more than one earns presents by having a birthday.

Nicodemus struggled with accepting God's grace. He was drawn to Jesus and knew something wonderful was there, but he couldn't commit himself. Perhaps it was because he was a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews, not good things to be in John's Gospel. The fact that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night shows that he was hedging his bets. He called Jesus Rabbi and teacher and spoke about signs, all of which show only partial faith. Sure enough, when Nicodemus started a conversation with Jesus, he quickly got lost.

One is tempted to think that the problem for Nicodemus is that he was too educated. Like Paul, he was so steeped in learning that he couldn't see beyond his own understanding of how the world works. When Jesus used a multidimensional word that means both being born from above and born anew (or again),

Nicodemus could only see the horizontal meaning rooted in time. He thought, how could one possibly be born from one's mother a second time? Even when Jesus spoke of Spirit, Nicodemus again missed the point. Jesus sounds rather exasperated when Nicodemus got stuck in his own ways rather than using his learning to expand his view. We don't know if he ever got it. He will appear again in John's Gospel, in each case revealing only a partial faith in Jesus.

Meanwhile the dialogue in today's reading quickly moves from the personal to the communal. Instead of a conversation between two people, suddenly it is between "we" and all-y'all, a change obscured because "you" can be either singular or plural in English. In essence, it's a proclamation from one community to another, from the Gospel's Christian community to those who do not believe.

We are naturally drawn to the heart of this passage, the famous verse John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." Just in case you missed the point of that statement, John goes on: "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." The message is clear. God desires life, not death. God desires salvation, not condemnation. And God does it all out of love. As one commentator has put it, "The mission of the Son was the consequence of the Father's love; hence also the revelation of it."

In other words, the Son came into the world through pure grace of God's love. That circles us right back to Abraham. When God called Abraham to leave his country and his kindred and his father's house, God offered him pure grace. Abraham accepted it. He accepted it without knowing what he was accepting. One almost wonders what would have happened had not Abraham believed. It's on a par with Mary's decision to say "Yes" to the angel Gabriel. The world would be a very different place without the faith of those two people.

What does all of this mean for the life of Trinity Cathedral? I suspect that some of us are like Nicodemus, drawn to Jesus but uncertain about commitment, perhaps complacent in our ways and unable to imagine a new way of being. It is significant that Jesus did not reject Nicodemus even though his faith was imperfect. There's a lot of hope there. We are also called to be like Abraham, saying yes to God even when we don't know what that means, stepping out in faith toward a future we cannot see. When Abraham believed God, he released God's blessing. He was blessed to be a blessing. How wonderful it would be for us to be blessed to be a blessing to others!

In many ways, we already are. I've often recited the litany of how we bless one another and the world around us, caring, feeding, clothing, walking with people through the storms of their lives. We do it for the love of God, not in order to earn God's love. We do it in order to show God's love to the world. At their best, Christian communities are places of reconciliation, of faith, hope, and love. They are grounded in the vertical component of the Spirit so that they can extend the love of Christ outwards beyond their walls. Let us, too, richly dwell in that Spirit so that we can be a place of faith, hope, and love. And remember – the greatest of these is love.

[Lent 2: Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17. The commentator is C.K. Barrett in his classic study, *The Gospel According to John*.]