

Faith Matters
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Genesis 15:1-6
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16
Luke 12:32-40

I have a friend who, although old enough to be my mother, is like a sister to me. We just connect, you know? Both of us cradle Lutherans, both of us pastor's kids, both missionaries, we have a lot in common. Most importantly, we both follow Jesus. It's a great connector.

Eunie is a career missionary and has lived in many kinds of situations, often very basic. Mostly theirs has been a simple home in a small village, with chickens and goats populating her backyard. As a nurse ó often the only medically-trained person in the area ó she operated a free back-door clinic. People lined up early; there was always a small crowd by the time she'd had her breakfast and opened the back door.

She once confided in me that her prayer, on awakening every morning was this: "Lord, make me a blessing to someone today." She had a little prayer taped to her bathroom mirror ó I wish I could remember all the words. But it had to do with actively listening and watching for that person who just needed a little extra attention. It was a simple, but beautiful prayer. It helped shaped Eunie to be the person she is.

My friends, that's what God wants for you. He wants you, as followers of Jesus, to wake up every morning with one goal: to focus on God's will for you. Before you even get out of bed, to ask: "What do you want for me today, Lord? Give me an assignment. Make me alert to that person whose voice expresses doubt; that person looking for assistance; that person sitting alone at lunch; that person who keeps to himself at work; the person in the grocery line who seems troubled." That's what disciples do: they listen for the voice of their Lord, ready to serve.

What we're looking at this morning is the reality that *faith matters*. It begins with God's promise. God begins the process; he takes the initiative. Promise creates faith; faith shapes values; values determine behavior and lead to service. That's the story of Abraham; that's what Jesus is driving at in our Gospel lesson today.

So let's begin with Abraham, who is featured in two of our three lessons. You will remember that back in Chapter 12, God appeared to Abraham and made three promises: land, descendants and blessing -- a double blessing, actually. He tells Abraham, "Go to the **land** I will show you and I will make you into a **great nation** and I will **bless** you; I will make your name great and **you will be a blessing**." He told Abram to go to the country God would show him. And so Abram went. He packed up everything he had, took his wife Sarah and his nephew Lot and they headed out. And, as God promised, he brought them to a new land where they could pitch their tents and graze their cattle.

Promise, by its very nature, creates faith! The thing promised isn't yours yet. But if you believe the person who made the promise, you act accordingly. It's all about trust. If you, as a parent, promise something to your child and fulfill it, that child will learn to trust you. The next time you make a promise, he is more ready to trust you. Promise and faith go together.

That's what happened to Abraham. God told him he would give him a land; Abraham went; settled in that land and grew wealthy. Now, in chapter 15, God appears to Abraham again, renewing his promises. You see, God had certainly led him to a new land. But the promise of a child and a new nation hadn't panned out yet. So Abraham asks God about that. "Lord, you still haven't given me a son. I guess what you really meant was that my slave should be my heir." But God re-affirms his promise and enlarges on it: "This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars— if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." God's promises don't always happen on our schedule, but they do always happen. Faith matters, and it is created by promise. And in our lesson today we read, "Abraham believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness." So important is this verse that it's one of the most frequently quoted by writers of the New Testament.

There are two things going on here and they're important. Because *righteousness* is about standing blameless before God. The first thing is *ó* and hear this! *ó* righteousness is *not* about doing the right thing. It is *not* about doing your best. Abraham's righteousness was not about what he did or did not do. Righteousness is what *God* does for *us*. Abraham simply believed God's promise. He believed; and God *counted him righteous*: blameless before him.

So first, you are righteous before God by your faith, not by your actions. And second, God's promises are sure. If God has promised something, he will do it; he will not back away from it; he will bring it about. Now, the writer to the Hebrews points out that some of those to whom promises were made, did not see complete fulfillment in their lifetime. Yes, Abraham was given a son; no, he never saw millions of descendants. Yes, Abraham saw the land God gave him and he tented on it, grazed his cattle on it and became wealthy; but he never owned it. Abraham never owned anything but a small plot in which he buried Sarah. Hebrews 11 says: "They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth....Instead, they were **longing for a better country**—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them."

My friends, God will not go back on his promise; nor is the fulfillment of his promise dependent on you and me. Whether or not we believe and are faithful, God's purposes will be achieved. We can turn our backs on God; he will never turn his back on us. But the faith that he creates in us allows us *ó* indeed, compels us *ó* to lift our eyes to a higher horizon and trust God. Trust God! His promises are sure.

Promise creates faith. And faith shapes values. I'm reading a very interesting book just now, by the Christian writer, Eric Metaxas, who has written on Bonhoeffer, among others. His new book is called, *If You Can Keep It: The Forgotten Promise of American Liberty*. He's analyzing the American character, her values, tracing them back to their sources. And one of those sources is the great preacher, George Whitefield, who led the Great Awakening of the mid-1700s. Metaxas points to Whitefield as one of the great unifiers of the 13 Colonies, a man who helped give America her characteristic values.

Whitefield was a great orator. He could speak to thousands at a time (like 25,000!), in outdoor arenas, and be heard by every person. And he spoke so well that people compared his diction, rhythm and rhetoric to music. He was a compelling speaker, and powerful. He would often speak several times a day. And he was persuasive. Thousands of people became Christians under his preaching. His message was simple: that all -- regardless of social position or denomination -- were sinners before God, and equally had direct access to forgiveness in Christ. *All are equal before God! And all authorities are subject to God's greater authority.* These messages seeded something radically new in the minds of his hearers. By the time Whitefield died in 1770, an incredible 80% of the American population had heard him speak. By 1750, as John Piper notes, "Virtually every American loved and admired Whitefield and saw him as their champion."

Their new faith shaped their values. Honesty, kindness, hard work, selflessness. These sprang from their Christian faith. And in particular, according to Metaxas, was born a desire to help the less fortunate. To reach out in neighborly ways without expecting anything in return. To work for the greater good. He points to the fact that people of faith were at the forefront of the Abolitionist Movement and the Civil Rights movement -- just to name two. Faith shapes values.

And then values determine your actions. Let's look at our Gospel lesson. Jesus starts with promise ó did you notice that? "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom." It's his promise. It's his gift ó undeserved, unworked-for, unearned. He says, "Don't be afraid." You can turn that phrase around, as Scripture often does: *Be bold! Have courage! God is with you. And he has promised you his kingdom.*

If you trust the promises of a faithful God and the ultimate coming of his kingdom of justice and mercy, then that's what will motivate you to act. Once more, faith matters. Based on promise, your faith is created and your values are shaped. And it moves you into action. Because those values are based on love, you are motivated to serve. As Jesus was.

One of the things Abraham and later, Israel, didn't fully understand was God's promise of blessing. It wasn't so much that they would be blessed (although that's certainly part of it), but that they were meant to *be a blessing* to the nations. We as God's people, are meant to be a blessing, in service to others ó not just grabbing everything for ourselves (we talked about that last week), but ready to turn around and serve the next guy. Maybe this happens in the midst of your work, school, at home, or even at the beach! Jesus says, "Be dressed ready for service.ö Have a mindset ó be dressed in your head ó for service. Be ready to smile, lend a hand, to offer a word of encouragement when the opportunity comes. Who knows how God might use you, if you have a mindset for serving?"

Jesus dressed himself for service. Remember how once he tied a towel around his waist, got out a basin of water and washed his disciples' feet? And then he said, "If this is what I, your Teacher and Lord, do for you; you should do the same.ö Are you dressed for service? Whether with a towel or, like our Mexico Mission Team, wearing jeans, a T-shirt and workgloves ó be ready to serve. It's more of a mindset than a wardrobe.

And then Jesus says, "...and keep your lamps burning, like servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes." So, this is how you watch. This is how you get ready for his return. You don't camp out on a hill and get out your binoculars, being of no earthly good to anyone. No! Rather, in thankfulness for all God has done for you in Christ, you should be serving however you can, wherever you can. Do what is in front of you to do. How do you want Jesus to find you, when he returns? Do that.

Once you are dressed with a mindset for service, you will find many opportunities in your own life. And here at church, we will offer some ways to plug you in. Join the Mexico Mission Team, or go out with Sending Place. Join a Grow Group (you'll be hearing more about them in coming weeks). Help with the FISH food pantry for low income families; later this fall, help build a garden for House of Grace with City Team. Be dressed and ready to serve. There's nothing like it; just ask the Mexico Team.

Promise creates faith. Faith shapes values. Values determine behavior and get you dressed for service. This is the Christian life, and it makes a difference. Indeed, faith matters.