

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Second Sunday in Lent
12 March 2017

Scripture readings: Genesis 12:1-4a Psalm 121 Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 John 3:1-17

Well, I suppose the lessons from Genesis and Romans today make it a great day for Lutheran theologians in terms of grace and the challenge to works righteousness - the idea that if you do the right thing, God ends up owing you something. How much of our religious behavior is like that? O Lord, if I do this or I give that or I attend there or am nice to them or I love the unlovable or I share a meal or I give clothing to... If I do all that, then surely I'll get to heaven, right? God will owe us something because we are so damn nice. And apparently there's a long thread in religious thinking that is detectable in scripture that says, "*Maybe not.*"

"*For if Abraham was justified by works...*" meaning what he did, and if anybody could have been accused of paying attention to works, Abraham and his seed forever might be held accountable for the importance of good works, of the law and obedience to the law - "*For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about*" because Abraham and his seed have done a very good job. And this is my problem when we talk about the scribes and Pharisees when we read the story of Jesus. It sounds like a bad thing, that they were not nice people. They were *great!* They were like you! They cut all the roast beef. [laughter] They went to church - even on Wednesday nights when it's cold. [laughter] They gave big offerings. They kept the budget afloat. They taught Sunday School. They sat on the vestry. They held office. They meant to be good. And if anybody was good according to their own laws - as cockamammy as the laws might be - they were good. But throughout the history of religious people and in the scriptures themselves, we see this contrary idea that the business of obeying the law doesn't mean that God owes you squat!

The problem is understanding our relationship as people to each other and to the Almighty as a contractual one. I was talking to somebody this week who is planning to rent an apartment to a distant relative. Not that I've ever had properties or know anything about it, but I said, "*Be careful and make sure you have a written agreement.*" Well, I'm not going to move in until the first of May. I said, "*Well, make sure you charge for April.*" Well, sure enough, the request came: "*Can I put some things in the basement this week?*" You see how we are. And we're making huge money on it. You watch Judge Judy, don't you? [laughter] I mean the law is funny and she's nasty. [laughter] There are those who would have us believe that our relationship to God is like that.

But in the Romans text, what does scripture say? "*Abraham believed God and that was reckoned to him as righteousness.*" It had nothing to do with what he did. Abraham believed that he had a relationship with his Creator, and Abraham believed that his relationship with his Creator somehow was reflected in and worked out in his relationship with his family and his neighbors. But that didn't prevent the religious institution from prescribing what it is you had to slaughter, what it is you had to cut off from your first baby boy, what it is you had to eat, what it is you had to wear, how much it is you had to pay. None of that was excluded from the religious establishment and machinery of the day, and it worked out to look like something other than a good relationship with God, and it all worked out to a contractual relationship rather than a loving relationship with the Creator.

In humans, even my 101-year-old aunt will say when she sees this happen: "*You kills my dog and I kills your cat.*" Now that's easy for us because that's how we work when we don't think. May I suggest to you, friends, that's how we think when we don't believe. We often call that religious, and it affects the way we behave. It does have something elemental to do with turning over tombstones. It does have something elemental to do with painting swastikas. It does have something elemental to do with prejudice and hatred and ignorance, and something other than sharing and promulgating any kind of news that is anything other than good. And that's why we call ourselves at times evangelical. Now that doesn't mean right-wing Christians. That is terminology that has been hijacked in politics today. Evangelical simply comes from the Greek word for *good*. The *eu* in Greek becomes *ev* in English. So we get *euthanasia* which means a good death. *Euvangelical* means

good news. So when we call ourselves evangelical we're talking about people who believe in and are committed to and practice - and it takes practice. It's not doin' what comes naturally. It takes the practice of people who believe in and share good news with all people which means that we have to believe it, in the first place, ourselves. Otherwise we have nothing to share.

So as people who are not only evangelical but also catholic ... Now I grew up knowing *catholic* was a bad word. When there was something we didn't do in our protestant church, we didn't do it because it was catholic - meaning they do it and we don't. Well, that's not what *catholic* means. The immediate thing about catholic is it means universal. It also means orthodox, right believing. It also means the sense that we are connected, not just to our own kind, that we are not just a collection of inward-looking people who are afraid of difference in the rest of the world, but that because of the good news we are a people who understand that our God creates everybody and, therefore, everybody in the world is a brother or sister. They're not always easy to get along with, and I am living proof and testimony to the fact that they're not always people with whom we agree, despite the fact that I'm right! [laughter] Get it?

So here we have in scripture these threads of understanding how religion gets screwed up. We get righteous about being screwed up and call that religious. "*The promise that he would inherit the world would not come to Abraham or his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith.*" Abraham believed that God had a message of good news for his people and, believe it or not, for the world. And so things get messed up and then along comes this other cockamamy Jew called Jesus, and he reiterates that early understanding of God's love for the world. "*For God so loved the world...*" That's probably one of the most repeated, memorized and famous pieces of scripture in the world. Some people even put signs on their lawns: John 3:16. Isn't it interesting that we know that one piece of scripture above all others. "*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.*"

And then we screw that one up too, don't we. Unless you're a member of the Methodist Church, you are going to hell! Or the Episcopal Church or the Roman Catholic Church or the Eastern Orthodox Church. We do this all the time. We want to be right. We want to be righteous, and in our desire to care for ourselves we forget to listen to what God has to say and to believe what God says which is extraordinary good news for ourselves which allows us to stop worrying about all that other stuff and to start believing that everybody else in the world is God's child as a member of the same family, as people with whom we can disagree, from whom we can look different, who behave differently from ourselves, who are nevertheless members of our family who we must love and with whom we must sit down to Thanksgiving dinner.

"*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. Indeed God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*" And so the church will say, "*Unless you do it our way you're not going to be saved because of this scripture passage.*" That's backwards! Read this scripture passage backwards and you'll prove the soundness of the argument.

What is God's intention? Why did God send his son into the world? Why did God speak to Abraham? Why does God speak to us? So that the world might be saved through *him*, not through our religious organizations - that we might believe that God comes into the world for the salvation of us and all the world. He does not come into the world so that the world might be saved through our religious imagination or ecclesiastical structures, our political organizations, our ethnic purity, our cultural fear of difference. None of that is related to salvation. God's will is that human beings believe (a) that we are God's creatures, (b) that God loves whom God creates, (c) we are therefore liberated to love each other. Could it be that simple?

And, friends, we still mess it up, don't we. Because we're going to say, "*Well, Jesus was sent to the world to be sacrificed for our sins.*" Now that's nuts! Do you think God sits around saying, "*You'd better kill somebody or I can't forgive you of your sin - particularly my own child.*" What kind of parenting is that?!

No, I think Abraham and Jesus and maybe a couple of us someday will get the idea that God's message for us and for the world is a message simply of love - mother for a child (God as a mother - imagine that!), or a father for a child, the love of a spouse for the other. That's the message, plain and simple.

So then we ask the question: Why in the world did Jesus have to end up dying? Are you ready for this one? Because religious people can't stand the message. Because government can't stand the message. Because

society can't tolerate the message.

And what's the message? (a) that you are loved, (b) so is everybody else, (c) by the same Creator. There is nothing to be afraid of, and we have the rest of our lives with which to be evangelical and catholic. Our job is simply to be people of the good news for the whole world. Now that was so scary that Nicodemus went to Jesus by night to ask about it. Nicodemus was afraid and had good reason to be because he saw what society was going to do to Jesus and he knew if he associated himself with Jesus and with Jesus' message he, too, would be in danger. But the question is what are the options? To sell your soul or to use it. To sell it to evil and the devil or to run the risk of using it for the love which brings us into being in the first place. And, friends, you and I know that nobody gets out of here alive. What will be the account of what it is we do with our lives and our selves and our souls? Will it be that we were loved and risked believing that and sharing that or not. We can go to Jesus with Nicodemus at night, but be careful. The sun will rise in the morning and you and Nicodemus and Jesus and I will be seen together. And that's the risk we take by coming here. And we know that when seen we will not be seen alone and we know when we are seen together that our strength comes from the word that we hear and the meal that we share and the arms that we link together to confess and teach and preach to the world: We are loved and so are you!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.