

“The Righteousness of Faith”

Romans 4:13–25

June 8, 2008

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church

Romans 4:13–25

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”) —in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what was said, “So numerous shall your descendants be.” He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith “was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

Now the words, “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Prayer.

Fads come and go. I just wish narrow ties would come back and stay in style. I’m told platform shoes, Minnie skirts, and wearing your cap backwards or cocked off to the side all come and go.

Theological fads also come and go. Christian evangelical fundamentalism is the most recent fad that has seeped into the seminaries and onto the landscape. It may be driven by the support of powers politico, the counter-balance to global fundamentalism, the over correction of Christian liberalism, or the dumbing-down of society; or maybe all four. I don’t know. But don’t expect it to last.

When I went to seminary a mere 25 years ago, the fad was called Process theology, which found its roots in third-world impoverished Roman Catholic circles, primarily in South and Central America. Process was rooted in the belief that God is love, and God

“The Righteousness of Faith”

Romans 4:13–25

June 8, 2008

© The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

[Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church](#)

was eternally evolving into greater perfection. The conservative 1980s Vatican promptly extinguished that fire.

In the 1950s and 1960s Christian Liberalism reached its peak. It was driven by the disproportionate GDP spending on the Cold War, efforts to stomp out Communism by force, the guilt of the Jewish Holocaust, and the social conscious of a rapidly expanding middle-class. The theologian, Paul Tillich, and the social activists, Richard and Ronald Neibur, recorded articulately the principles of Christian Liberalism.

In the pre-World War II early part of the 1900's, the theological fad was called neo-orthodoxy, which was charted out in the epic Christian Systematic by the German theologian, Karl Barth. Neo-orthodoxy is an attempt to take the new Church (hence neo) and return it to the practices of the early, first century Church (orthodoxy). It was believed that because of their close proximity to the ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, their beliefs and practices would be the most authentic, and, therefore, the most appropriate to follow.

I can continue for a long time with this wonderful history lesson about the evolution of Christian theology, but where does it get us? It gives us some perspective of our current day, and a clear warning to those who would dig their heels in too deeply. But how is this related to our scripture today?

A theological fad was sweeping the church in Rome. The apostle Paul was addressing the issue in our epistle, his letter to the neophyte Christians forming a new Christ-centered community. The congregation consisted primarily of two different types of new Christians. One group were former Jews, raised in the law, steeped in tradition, and saw Jesus as the Messiah, the fulfillment of Jewish expectation. The other group was comprised of former Gentiles, non-Jews, not circumcised, no Torah history, no Covenant or Law to bind them, no tradition to fall back on. They started out with a clean slate.

Is there any surprise the two clashed?

The former Jewish disciples of Jesus were the product of the latest theological fad, prominent in the first half of the first century. Rabbi's had been arguing that Abraham received God's blessing because he kept Mosaic Law, which is to say, he knew in advance the content written on the tablets Moses received on Mt. Sinai.

Let us be clear. Abraham came 500 years before Moses. To Abraham God gave his promise, his Covenant, to be his God, and Abraham and his ancestors would be forever God's people. Old Abraham and his elder wife, Sarah, were barren, and too old to conceive, let alone to give birth. How was this to be?

The convoluted fad of Jewish thought at the time of Jesus, which was heavily anchored by the righteous adherence to God's inflexible law, was to believe that adherence to

the yet-to-be-revealed law is what made Abraham righteous and justified before God. They probably successfully argued that monkeys can fly, too!

The apostle Paul turned this fad, this illogical argument on its head, and clears the air.

It wasn't the law that justified Abraham. It was his faith in God, that God would be faithful to His word and promise. Paul reaches back into Jewish scripture to grab a hold of Abraham, to lift him up and make him the example for Christian faith, to disciples in the first generation following Jesus, and as an example for Christian faith for us today.

Faith is the crucial element in the Christian life. With it we move mountains; without it we are lost. Consider what we learn from Abraham's faith:

- The object of Abraham's faith was God's promise, v18
- The strength of Abraham's life rested in his faith in that he believed God's promise, though it seemed impossible, v19,20.
- The ground of his faith was the ability and faithfulness of God to do what he promised, v21.
- The result of his faith was that he was judged right with God, v22.
- The record of his faith was given to teach us that all who believe in the revealed will of God, like Abraham, are counted right before God (justified), v23-25.

Those who stake their theological bottom line on the righteous adherence to the Law will ultimately be disappointed. The Law will only take the Christian so far; but it always draws us up short, incomplete. An element of imperfection always spoils the pot. When sin is one of the core characteristics of the human condition, and when it serves as a primary means of differentiating between the human and divine, then, by definition, we all fail and fall short.

With Jesus, Paul correctly sees that righteousness cannot save. The only thing that can make up for righteousness' shortcoming is faith. The Law cannot save unless it is complimented by faith in Jesus Christ.

Ah! Here now is the anchor for our theological boat. When the storms of theological fads are blowing and raging, this is what keeps us anchored to our common belief: Faith in Jesus Christ doesn't replace our need to follow the Law of God, rather, it compliments it. Faith in Jesus Christ, the belief that Jesus has removed our sins and will save us into eternal life, is holding God to His promise.

By our faith, together, God and us are held to mutual accountability: our belief makes us accountable to God, and God's fulfillment of his promise make Him accountable to us. And together, the story of redemption, atonement, and salvation is written out in the life of every disciple of Jesus Christ.

So, today, we learn that we've been given fair warning. Righteousness does matter. What we do better be consistent with the Law of God. But righteousness alone doesn't make the cut; we are called to a life of faith, belief that through Jesus we are saved.

The word of the Lord. Amen.