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Ninth Sunday after Pentecost - Year C

Genesis 15:1-6

Psalm 33:12-22

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Luke 12:32-40

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“O may all who come behind us find us faithful.” I’m sure many of you will recognize the first line of the chorus from that well-known modern hymn. Today’s scripture readings are filled with faith and faithful people. Did they want to be found faithful by the generations after them? We’ll never know because the Genesis story was written well before any literature delved into the inner psyche and referenced conversations had within the character’s own mind. But it does seem clear that these individuals wanted to be found faithful in the eyes of God. Hopefully, the task that we constantly take up and the reason we gather here together is to understand more deeply just *how* to be faithful followers of the God known in and through Jesus Christ--the same God that found Abraham to be faithful.

In order to understand the *how*, we must first understand *to what* we are being called. The word for faith in Hebrew in Genesis 15 is “aman”. And its counterpart in Greek is “pistis”.

Combined, these two terms show up in our Bibles nearly 350 times. So if we don’t really understand what this thing called ‘faith’ is, we can completely miss a huge part of what God’s word is trying to teach us.

One of the struggles in understanding the ‘what’ is that some words in Greek and Hebrew don’t translate well into English: case in point, pistis. In order to get a full understanding of the word in Greek, we’d have to say something more like ‘faith *and* faithfulness’. We’re not talking about a simple mental assent to believing that God merely exists just as we exist in reality. We’re talking about living into the reality of what the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God on earth means in our lives, for the world, and for how we interact with the world.

And unfortunately we run into the same exact translation problem in the same verse in Genesis!! 15:6 says, “Then he believed (Hebrew word there is ‘aman) in the Lord; and He reckoned it to his as righteousness (Hebrew word here is ‘Tsedaqah’).”

Tsedaqah’s counterpart in Greek is dikaiosune, which is often translated as righteousness, and these two words show up over 225 times in our Bible. We see this term in Hebrews 11 as well. Verse 7 says, “By faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.” This word ‘dikaiosune’ is another one that doesn’t translate well into English. In order to really understand it, we’d have to say something like ‘righteousness and justice’. Even so, they are translated interchangeably in a few places in the New Testament. That means when we see phrases like “the righteousness of God”, we would do well to also think “the justice of God”.

So now we have a broader understanding of the use of the word ‘faith’ to mean both ‘faith and faithfulness’. And we also now know that there’s an important coexistence and interconnectedness of righteousness and justice. Now to make things more complicated, the Scripture today now suggests some interaction between faith and faithfulness and righteousness and justice--that those who obey God and are faithful to His calling are heirs of righteousness. If only there were a term we could use that could encompass all of these things in one...

I want to offer you a word that may do just that job: ‘shalom’. Simply translated, shalom means peace or the peace of God. But if we consider it in more robust terms, what does the peace of God require? If shalom were to truly exist here now, what would that entail? We find a great definition in Psalm 85: “Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky”. Shalom exists when God’s righteousness, justice, peace, mercy, and love are truly enacted here on Earth in ways that the world can see fully.

This is how we carry on the legacy, the tradition of Abraham and his descendants--working to enact the Kingdom of God right here on Earth by faithfully seeking righteousness and justice and peace.

So if we stop right here, we can say we understand ‘to what’ we are being called. But that doesn’t accomplish the task before us--we also need to know *how* to do this thing we call faith in Christ. John Davidson Hunter writes, “For Christian believers, the call to faithfulness is a call to live in fellowship and integrity with the person and witness of Jesus Christ. There is a timeless character to this call that evokes qualities of life and spirit that are recognizable throughout history and across cultural boundaries. But this does not mean that faithfulness is a state of abstract piety floating about the multifaceted and compromising realities of daily life in actual situations. Saint Paul, in Acts 13, refers to King David having “served God’s purpose *in his own generation.*” This suggests, of course, that faithfulness works itself out in the context of complex social, political, economic, and cultural forces that prevail at a particular time and place...To face up to the challenge of integrity and faithfulness in our generation, then, requires that Christians understand the unique and evolving character of our times.”

This is where the Gospel of Luke comes in--just how can we replicate Abraham’s faithfulness and righteousness in modern times?

A few years ago I received what may be the best way of understanding righteousness that I’ve ever heard--Righteousness is the process of making things right. It is the process of enacting the Kingdom of God and God’s shalom right here on Earth in our daily lives and in the lives of our neighbors. And through the Gospel of Luke, Jesus lays out some pretty specific ways to do that: Sell your possessions and give to charity. Be dressed in readiness. Be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns so that they may immediately open the door when he comes and knocks. Be ready.

Jesus’ directions here fall within what’s considered to be a miniature version of the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew. It’s where Jesus lays out the tangible ways that you and I can partake in the task of building the shalom of God here.

This parable in Luke always makes me think of Christ’s return being something reminiscent of a secret shopper, coming in to check and make sure that I’m checking IDs like I’m supposed to. And taken in this short context, it can certainly seem that way. But what Christ is calling us to is a way of life that is markedly different from the world that surrounds us. In our American context, we exist within a capitalist consumer society that, if and when allowed, can permeate

every facet of life. The Almighty is replaced with the Almighty Dollar and we turn into Mario trying to collect more and more coins. We begin to see a world with no neighbors, only threats, allies of convenience, dispensable acquaintances that only exist for my benefit. The world in which we find ourselves is marked by competition with winning always being the goal--a world marred by fear of those who are 'other' and 'different', with stronger locks and taller fences as the cure. But as Stanley Hauerwas reminds us, "We shall have to break the habit of having church in such a way that people are deceived into thinking that they can be Christians and remain strangers."

And I firmly believe we accomplish that task of making neighbors through the faithful work of bringing the shalom of God to fruition in our world. From a business standpoint, I find it absolutely fascinating that one of the most common topics that Jesus talks about is economics, especially microeconomics. How we dispatch our money and how we deal with each other in business is deeply attached to our faithfulness to God and our work in making things right. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also".

Is your investment solely in this world? How do you even invest in the unfailing treasure of heaven?

I'll be the first to admit that finding the line between wants and needs is incredibly hard in this world. We live in a culture that invents demand. Before the invention of the PlayStation, can you guess how many people needed one? For millenia, mankind has lived without Krispy Kreme, but it's only through God's power that I can drive by a "hot and now" sign and not stop. But we must work together and practice naming needs and wants for what they are and finding where our investments could be better directed to serve the inbreaking of God's shalom here. We have to talk about these things here. How do I take part in righteousness--in the process of making things right--tomorrow at work? How do I enact the justice and peace of God when dealing with that one coworker I just can't stand? Where's God's compassion in my next business deal? How do I enact shalom with teenagers at home? We have to talk about and know and wrestle with these issues right here before we will ever be able to change the way we deal with them out there.

We are called to be ready and to be found in the midst of the work expected of us. And Christ lays out where he is to be found: among the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick. That is where we belong. We are called to invest in making things right, in bringing the shalom--the justice and peace of God--to fruition right here on Earth. What investments can be made right here in this church that serve the needs of your neighbors? What skills can be brought to bear to bring shalom here in tangible and visible ways? What investments can be made in the work this church may not be capable of internally? Not every church is capable of providing every need. That's why we have organizations like HELP.

Not every church can provide year round shelter or comprehensive case management. Not every church can provide medical and dental care for the uninsured. But can we support those efforts with our time, talent, and treasure. I believe it is an injustice and an abomination against God's vision for the world that the leading cause of bankruptcy in one of the wealthiest countries in the world is medical bills. But I also believe we must have a theology robust enough to include our bodily wellbeing along with our soul's wellbeing. In Old Testament times, health was directly correlated with the existence of God's shalom. The prophet Jeremiah ensures that God will restore health and heal wounds when his people are faithful. Part of God's justice, part of his shalom, involves health, especially for those who are at the fringes of society. HELP is currently working to enact that justice of God through access to healthcare by expanding our ability to care for the uninsured by raising funds to hire a part-time nurse practitioner, giving at least 300 of our neighbors the chance to receive high-quality affordable healthcare.

I could fill up another hour with stories about the needs that exist right here in this town. A 68-year-old man sleeping under the 35th Street bridge in Newport News; a family who was evicted after a terrible divorce; a homeless man in his 50s dying in the woods alone right behind the bus station; a woman whose paranoia has sequestered her to living in her van. But one close to home is just two blocks from here: a man living in a shed behind his grandmother's home that his family sold out from under him; a man fraught with mental illness without anyone to help him get through the day or navigate a world that scares him. How can this church provide God's shalom to that man? How can we use our treasure to show him the love and justice of God in

tangible ways? A simpler question yet--can we even begin to see the face of Jesus in this dirty, homeless, sick man?

Does this community matter in the context of our faithfulness to God? To quote Hunter again, “It is here, through the joys, sufferings, hopes, disappointments, concerns, desires, and worries of the people with whom we are in long-term and close relation--family, neighbors, coworkers, and community--where we find our authenticity as a body and as believers. It is here where we learn forgiveness and humility, practice kindness, hospitality, and charity, grow in patience and wisdom, and become clothed in compassion, gentleness, and joy. This is the crucible within which Christian holiness [and righteousness] is forged. This is the context within which shalom is enacted”. It happens here.

I’m not here to tell you to sell your possessions and give to the poor--though I feel like I’ve heard that somewhere before. Just a few verses further into the Gospel of Luke, Jesus reminds us that “From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more.” As brothers and sisters in Christ we have been given the Kingdom of God, present and active here on earth, to share with this world.

But I am here to challenge you to find ways to ensure that your treasure is invested properly--invested in those things that bring about the shalom of God and to find ways to serve God in our own generation. And let’s not limit our imagination when it comes to thinking about treasure.

What do we have at our disposal--our time, talents, community connections, business acumen--that can be brought to bear to help enact God’s shalom here? What about our preexisting conditions? The hymn in Philippians 2 explains Jesus’ pre existing condition: “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God...”. And how did Christ use his pre existing condition?

“He did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking on the very nature of a servant...he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death--even to death on a cross!”. I have a pre existing condition--I was born a middle-class white male in a society where that by its very nature offers me certain privileges that aren’t always afforded to other races, genders, and socioeconomic statuses. And I

firmly believe that how I use that pre existing condition is a direct example of my faithfulness to God working itself out in tangible ways; as well as the opposite: how I've used my pre existing condition as something to be used to my own advantage. Let's use the gifts of our imaginations to see where we can breathe shalom into this world. We believe in a God made man, born of a virgin, crucified, killed, buried, resurrected, ascended, and still present and active in this world through the Holy Spirit! What could be outside of the bounds of our understanding and creativity now! Let us invest creatively in enacting the love, justice, peace, and righteousness of God right here, right now. Whether that investment is in this church, this neighborhood, an organization like HELP, or in each other, let us continue to show our faith through our treasure, for where our treasure is, there our hearts will be also. Amen.