

Grace and peace to you my friends and fellow sojourners from Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us.

We continue our Lenten journey on this second Sunday in Lent. I am sure you all know that I like to quote Martin Luther for obvious reasons as well as Chad Bird, David Lose, and Karoline Lewis. I also sometimes quote a variety of other Lutheran commentators one of which is sometimes Rolf Jacobson. So, imagine my surprise when I discovered Rolf was writing the God Pause devotionals this week. I **will** be using some of his thoughts and actual words today as well.

But first, a brief comment on both our first and second readings. This is the second straight Sunday where a reading from Genesis contains a covenant or promise from God to an individual. Do you know what **matters** most with promises? It is whether the promise-maker actually can and will keep the promise. Think of how many promises individual politicians make that they **want** to keep, maybe, but that in reality they have absolutely no control over whether those promises are kept or not. Yes they can propose the right legislation but in the end they are only one lonely vote in a sea of votes needed to pass their proposal. And that proposal may still have to get through another chamber of Congress and two **other** branches of government. Now **God**, on the other hand, **can** and **will** keep God's promises. That is what Noah believed last week and that is also what Abraham believes this week. And God, therefore, deemed their faith and trust in God as righteousness.

In our reading from Romans today, Paul also talks about God's promise, really a set of promises, to Abraham. Did Abraham disobey God? Yes. Did Abraham doubt God? Yes. Did Abraham laugh at God and God's promises? Yes. And pretty much Sarah too. But in the end, what counted was that Abraham **did** also trust God's promises. And that trust, that faith, made **all** the difference.

Matt Skinner made contextual claims in his commentary on our gospel reading today. First, he points out that our reading today is almost exactly at the midpoint of the book and serves to **initiate** a major shift in the plotline of Mark's gospel story. For instance, depending on the translation used, phrases or words with divine origin such as Christ, Messiah, or Son of Man have not been used since the gospel's opening verse until now. Also until now the plot has been focused on Jesus' ministry of healing, setting free, and teaching. With **these** verses the plot shifts to more of a focus on Jesus and what is yet to come for Jesus.

Matt also points out that these verses are crucial for us to understand the Gospel according to Mark as a whole. You know, determining what it **means** to be a Christian. These verses from Mark are especially linked to the theology espoused by Paul in Romans most notably in our Romans 4 reading today. In fact, Jesus finally starts to tell the disciples what Jesus wants from them, from us. In a **nutshell** – self-denial. John Calvin said self-denial constitutes the sum of the Christian life, but what is self-denial? Self-denial is not about squashing our desires or delaying gratification. Self-denial does not mean seeking or even embracing abuse or acting as if **suffering** itself is redemptive or a mark of virtue. I am sure you know some Christians who live this way. Self-denial means **separating** our own selves from how we or society normally defines us. Our family, kin, vocation and, or work. Self-denial is embracing a **new** understanding of **our** identity. An identity not in and of ourselves but in and of God. My friends, I know that this is not an easy concept because it is actually way, way more radical than any of us want. But, my friends, this is the way – the way of Jesus.

Kurt Struckmeyer describes it this way: “At the heart of Christianity is a powerful ethic. It is what the followers of Jesus called *the Way* – a way of living based on love and compassion, reconciliation and forgiveness, inclusion and acceptance, peace and nonviolence, generosity and justice. This ethic is what makes Christianity good.” Let there be no doubt that I do not say this lightly. This is not an easy way to live for several reasons. First, it is not how most of us were raised or taught to think. The second reason is its countercultural nature in today’s world is actually portrayed as counter-counter-cultural. Finally, we believe we are created in God’s image. So it is easier for us to see God as a God of judgement because that then gives **us** license for having and applying our own judgments. We are a lot more comfortable with the judgment thing than with the aspects of love that result in this ethic of *the Way*.

Self-denial can also have many aspects. Think about Abraham and Sarah, for them it was not so much about denial of self as it was about denial of remaining **by** themselves. Children are often a strain on the marriage relationship so think what it was probably like for them at, oh, 99 and 100. They denied themselves a life that was autonomous, enclosed, safe, secured, and **just** the two of them - for a life that propels them into relationship – with God and with a future realized by abounding relationship. In reality, self-denial is embracing the truth that we cannot live in this world, we cannot live our lives without being in relationship – actually **many** relationships.

Ann Smith writes about this relational church ethic using these words: “*It is not the task of the church to make America great again. The contemporary task of the church is to make Christianity countercultural again. And once we untether Jesus from the empire, rules, and tradition; we begin to see just how countercultural and radical Jesus’ ideas actually are. Enemies? Love them. Violence? Renounce it. Money? Share it. Foreigners? Welcome them. Sinners? Forgive them. These are the kind of radical ideas that will always be opposed by the principalities and powers, but which the followers of Jesus are called to embrace, announce, and enact.*”

Hear then the good news:

Rolf Jacobson took exception to the general idea that three passages in Mark, including ours today, are passion predictions.

In this and the other two passages, Jesus was actually **teaching** the disciples what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah.

These passages are **teachings** about the crucified Messiah.

To be the Messiah means not to be served, but to **serve**.

Not to command, but to obey.

Not to kill, but to be crucified for our sake.

And not to stay dead, but to be raised so that all might have life. That is a story yet to come for us this year.

The heart of what Paul teaches us in Romans is that God has done something for us that we **cannot** do for ourselves.

In our Monday Faith Journey meeting this week, Richard Rohr in our study material said: "*The great illusion we must overcome is the illusion of separateness. It is the primary task of religion to communicate not worthiness but union.*"

Anyone care to hazard the one word I use over and over that says the same thing?

Yes, that is right. Relationship.

My dear people, you/we are **already** children of God.

We are already in relationship with God.

Believe it. Trust it. Relate it.

Grace and peace to you my friends. This week may you deny yourself and enter into relationship with God and others in the **identity** that God has for you.

Amen