

March 1, 2017 (Ash Wednesday) – Romans 4:13-25 & Luke 24:44-53

As a child, I argued with my mother. A lot. The 4th commandment was not my strong suit. And there was one particular argument that I seemed to have with her over and over and over again.

It would go something like this: I would ask for something. A toy. A video game. A trip to Dairy Queen. Something frivolous like that. And my mother would say, “Maybe,” or “I’ll think about it,” or “We’ll see.”

And then we would have an opportunity to get said toy or video game or ice cream and I would ask for it again. And she would say, “No, not today.” And I would say, “But you promised!” And she would say, “I did no such thing. I didn’t promise you anything. I don’t make promises I don’t intend to keep.”

Eventually, I would realize she was right. She hadn’t promised me anything. I had heard it as a promise, but in reality it wasn’t anything of the sort. And being a litigious child with a strong need for fairness in all things, that would eventually silence my argument.

Promises are important. They’re one of the bedrocks of civilization, really. You can’t do business without promises. You can’t have government without promises. You can’t have marriage without promises.

Because, at their core, promises are necessary to build trust. The greater the promise, the greater the trust you need. But also the greater the trust you build.

I think that’s why Jesus treats adultery so seriously when he talks about marriage. Jesus is very strict about marriage. This is a huge promise that you are making. And as a result, it is the beginning of a huge amount of trust between a husband and wife.

It is such a huge promise and such a huge amount of trust that there is virtually nothing that can destroy it in God’s eyes. Nothing that can excuse a divorce under God’s Law. Except for one thing: adultery. Marital unfaithfulness breaks that promise and it breaks that trust. In a way that, for many couples, is unrepairable. And for that reason and that reason only, God will allow a marriage to end.

Promises are important. Trust is important. It’s important in human relationships like business contracts and government oaths of office and marriage vows. But it’s even more important to God. And we see that importance play out in our First Lesson today.

In the first three chapters of Romans, Paul talks a lot about righteousness and the Law. But his goal isn’t to make righteousness sound like something easy to achieve or the Law easy to keep. On the contrary, he says the exact opposite.

None is righteous. No, not one. No one does good. Not even one. That’s what he tells us. The world is full of idolatry and lust and hypocrisy and all sorts of evil things. We’re all guilty of them. We’re all judged unworthy under the Law.

And even worse, we know it. Because we know God’s Law. It’s written on our heart. It’s written in our Bibles. It’s preached to us every week from this pulpit. God’s Law shines like a spotlight, illuminating every evil thing we’ve done. And yet we still keep on sinning.

And for that God’s wrath is already being poured out. From dust we were created. To dust we will return. That’s what you see when you look to the righteousness that comes from the Law. You see only a person created from dust who will one day return to dust. Because that’s all we deserve.

But then in chapter four, Paul pivots his argument. And he says, “But don’t despair. There’s more to life than God’s Law. And there’s a different kind of righteousness that we can look for. One that doesn’t rest on the Law. But instead one that rests on God’s promises.”

We see that righteousness at work in Abraham. Abraham who was 75 years when God promised to make him a great nation. 75 years old without a single child. 75 years old and married to a wife who was 65 years old.

And for the next 25 years, God would come to Abraham time after time and say, “I have promised to make you a great nation.” And time after time Abraham said, “Alright God. I believe you. It seems pretty unlikely. I don't know how this can be possible. I might try to hurry things along with my wife's servant Hagar. But I believe you.”

Abraham believed God's promise. He trusted that God had the power to do what he had promised. He gave glory to God for blessing him with this promise even before it had been fulfilled. And God credited this faith to him as righteousness. Not the righteousness of the Law, but the righteousness of Faith.

How in the world can there be righteousness that comes by faith? I mean, righteousness by the Law makes sense to us. Good food tastes good. A good rose smells good. A good blanket feels good. A good person does good. It's perfectly logical.

The righteousness of faith isn't nearly so cut and dried. A bad person does bad... but gets treated as if he's good? Why?

Well, the answer is really the core of our entire sermon series this Lenten Season. It's called the art of living by faith. And the art of living by faith is this: Faith isn't about you. It's about who you believe in.

By faith, Abraham believed that God had the power to keep his promises. By faith, Abraham took that huge promise that God had made and watched it be built into a huge trust in his God. And throughout the history of God's people, that pattern repeats itself.

God promises to rescue Noah and his family from the Flood, and then he keeps that promise. God promises to rescue the Israelites from Egypt, and then he keeps that promise. God promises to bring the Israelites back into the Promised Land, and then he keeps that promise. God promises to bring his people back from Babylonian exile, and then he keeps that promise.

Over and over again, God makes huge promises. And then he keeps those promises. And every time he does, more and more trust is built. More and more faith is credited by God as righteousness.

Credited not by the Law, but by faith. Which is kind of ironic, when you think about it. Because of promises like Romans chapter four, we have faith that our faith is credited to us as righteousness. And that faith is also credited as righteousness.

In the end, we live by faith. We live, throwing ourselves on the mercy of God and saying, “I know you have the power to save me. You've proven it time and time again. I know you have the love to save me. You've proven it time and time again. I know you will keep your promise to save me. You've proven it time and time again. So now, here I am, grabbing hold of your Son's cross. Grabbing hold of your promise. Please... save me.”

That is the art of living by faith. It's an art that Jesus himself gave to his disciples and to us. Our Gospel lesson says that after His resurrection, Jesus opened their minds so that they could understand the scriptures. He opened their minds to the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms. He opened their minds to everything written about him.

So that they could see that all of it had been fulfilled. That when God makes a promise, he keeps that promise. And when God promises to save you, you are saved. It is done. It is finished.

My mother never made a promise she couldn't keep. And because of that, she didn't make very many promises. My God never made a promise He couldn't keep. But in his great power and his great love, he makes promise after promise. Because he can and does keep them all.

The greater the promise, the greater the trust you need. But also the greater the trust you build. God has made the greatest promise of all in promising to save you. And he has built the greatest trust, the greatest faith, the world has ever seen by sending his Son to keep that promise on Calvary's hill. Amen.