

Calling the Imperfect

The Scripture I read first this morning, the Old Testament lectionary passage for this morning, is heard a lot around this time every year. This is the time, after all, when we prepare to send our young people off on a new stage of their journey. All over the country in the past few weeks and in the upcoming weeks, baccalaureate services have been and will be happening. All over the country, graduates are being fêted. All over the country, parents, grandparents, family and friends are preparing to send high school graduates off to college and college graduates off to their life's work. It is a time of beginning journeys.

So it seems very natural to associate this story in Genesis about the beginning of Abram's journeys with the new beginnings in the lives of our graduates. I'll take just a few minutes this morning to draw those obvious parallels, but then I want to broaden the picture this morning to talk about some less commonly considered themes in the Abraham story. While it is good for us to remember Abraham's faith in God and how he literally put feet to his faith, there are other lessons here for us this morning about our fallibility and God's faithfulness, especially when we consider the whole of Abraham's journey and see it in conjunction with this morning's Gospel story.

In this age of the cell phone, the internet and instantaneous worldwide communication, it is easy for us to downplay just how astonishing it was for a man like Abram to leave his country, his kindred and his father's house. In a country that is criss-crossed with smooth pavement leading anywhere we want to go, highways that are rarely deserted and that are regularly patrolled by helpful law enforcement officers, we can easily lose sight of the sheer difficulty and danger that any journey presented. To leave one's country in ancient times was truly a journey into the unknown. What road conditions lay ahead, what unfamiliar languages one might need to learn, the availability of food and water, the friendliness of a new land's inhabitants, absolutely none of this would have been available to Abram and Sarai and their followers. By leaving their families, they were leaving the only guaranteed support system available to them. There were no government aid programs, no embassies or consular offices. Once they struck out on their own, they were truly on their own. And since a father had absolute authority over his children, for a man to leave his father's home with his father still living meant an irreparable breach. It was an insult to the family system, a blow to the family's economic well-being. A father and a family so disregarded had no obligation to receive the return of a prodigal.

Let us contrast that situation, then, with our situation now. As we prepare to send our graduates off on their journeys, we can schedule their transportation to the very minute. We can know precisely who will greet them at the end of their journey and have likely been in regular contact with that person or persons. Unless our grads are travelling to a very few places around the globe, we can be reasonably sure of their safety. They will continue to be covered by our health insurance if they are going off to college. If they are beginning their careers, they enjoy the same safety net as all American workers – we know at least that they will not starve. We can continue to be in daily contact with them, almost regardless of their destination. And they leave, I would imagine, with the absolute certainty that we will be glad to see them when they come back, even years later. The “boomerang child” is a phenomenon known to many of us and not, at least in my case, regretted at all.

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So Abram's journey required a different kind of faith than is required of our journeys but I hope that it nevertheless is a faith that can inform us, especially those who stand on the cusp of their own journeys. It is the kind of faith that helps us to answer God's calling even when it seems to defy the wisdom of the world. It is the kind of faith that spurs us to respond to the movement of the Spirit in our hearts even when it means our capabilities will be tested to the utmost. Abram's faith led him on a journey on which he went from being Abram, "High Father," to Abraham, "Father of Many Nations." Abraham's faith made him not only the physical father of a multitude, but the spiritual father and exemplar for all the adherents of the three great monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. We can read in the gospels as well as in the Old Testament just how proud the Jews were to claim this wandering Aramean as their progenitor and the Apostle Paul goes to great lengths in his writing to tie Gentile Christians to this heritage. We should all be as proud of Father Abraham and we should all pray to be gifted with the depth and strength of faith that has made him a spiritual hero to millions.

But it is equally important for us to remember that Abraham, for all his faith, was not perfect. In the verses that immediately follow the passage I read, rather than trust to the promise of God that he will find Canaan to be a rich land, he flees to Egypt at the first sign of famine. While there, he engages in some less than ethical conduct, willing to pass his wife off as his sister and sell her into Pharaoh's harem in return for his own safety and profit. In fact, he pulls this same scam some time later on the unsuspecting King Abimelech of Gerar. And although we remember him for his faith that God will bless him with a son from Sarah and his willingness to sacrifice even Isaac to God if necessary, we tend to gloss over the fact that he hedges his bets on the whole heir problem by taking his wife's servant girl to bed and then abandons both mother and child at the request of his jealous wife. This is the great hero of three faiths? What on earth can God have been thinking to choose and to continue to bless this man?

To move toward an answer to that question, let us turn to our Gospel reading for the morning in Matthew 9. Here we find Jesus, whose followers have heretofore been the rough but presumably socially and religiously acceptable fishermen of Galilee, now calling that most despised of men in occupied Israel, a tax collector. Remember, what those in Galilee and Judea would have felt for a tax collector is not the same polite disdain with which the average American might view the local IRS agent. In that time and place, tax collectors were open collaborators with a hated enemy. The taxes gathered by Rome and its agents paid for the soldiers who occupied the land, who brutalized the people, who profaned the holy city. One of the truly remarkable aspects of Jesus' ministry with his disciples is that his followers included both Matthew, the former collaborator, and Simon the Zealot. Without the restraining influence of Jesus, Simon would likely have cut Matthew's throat in a dark alley.

The Pharisees immediately challenged Jesus for associating with such undesirables. In fact, in Matthew's gospel, this is the cause of their first questioning of him, the first hint of the growing enmity that would lead to his death. What they fail to understand is that reaching out to those on the outside of normal society is at the very heart of Jesus' mission. He came and he comes for the poor, the prisoner, the sick, the hungry. Those categories are spiritual as well as physical. Just as God chose imperfect persons in Abraham and his family to be at the forefront of the restoration of relationship between humankind and Creator, so too does Jesus choose the imperfect ones to carry the Good News of God's love and desire for reconciliation.

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We can find good examples of this peculiar preference of God for flawed vessels in far more recent storytelling as well. A movie that makes this point well is one of my favorites, 1997's "The Apostle," written and directed by its star, Robert Duvall. Duvall plays Sonny Dewey, a Pentecostal preacher from Texas. Although he is a very successful and apparently sincere evangelist, he commits a terrible crime early in the movie and becomes a fugitive from the law. In a touching scene shortly after his flight, he prays fervently all night for forgiveness and guidance, then rebaptizes himself in a nearby river. Calling himself "the Apostle E. F.," he embarks on a mission to rebuild an abandoned church and to restart its ministry. Once again, he is successful in drawing the community back together and changing lives for the better. By the end of the film, he has found enough grace to surrender quietly to the police who have caught up with him rather than running again or using his willing congregation as a shield.

The fact that God embraces, brings into the Kingdom and relies on such very imperfect people as Abraham, Matthew and Sonny Dewey is good news to me and I'll bet it's good news for many of you as well. At Wednesday night's Deacons' meeting, Charlotte asked each of us to share something that no one else present knew about us. I jokingly said that if there were stories that y'all hadn't heard about me, chances were pretty good that's the way I wanted it. But beneath the joke was a reality shared, I think, by most of us. There are things in my life of which I am less than proud. Most of us have secrets in our past, skeletons in our closets that we are not willing to share, even with our closest friends. But the good news in the stories of Abraham and Matthew and Sonny is that God loves us anyway. The hated collaborator, Matthew, must have lived daily with his shame, must have been stunned to hear Jesus say to him, "Follow me." What great good news it must have been for him to hear Jesus say to his detractors, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

My sisters and brothers, if we are like Abraham and Matthew in having lived less than perfect lives, if we, like both of them, continue to suffer from bad judgment, rebellion and brokenness even after affirming the call of God in our lives, that will be neither a surprise nor an unforgivable affront to our loving God. Abraham was the father of many nations and all nations are blessed through him, even with his failings. Abraham's legacy of faith blesses us all as does his descendant, Jesus of Nazareth. Matthew, along with all the other disciples, deserted Jesus and ran on that Passover night in Jerusalem. But church tradition tells us that he brought the Good News to Persia, Ethiopia and Egypt, as well as writing the book placed first in the New Testament. Each of them, regardless of their stumbles, continued to follow the path God set them on, imperfectly trusting, imperfectly obeying, but ultimately continuing to walk with God.

Are we like Abraham and Matthew, you and I? Certainly we are in our fallibility. And by returning to this place again and again, by demonstrating with our actions that we are in pursuit of God's truth for our lives, we are like them in faith as well. We are called to be God's people in this world, just as they were, called to be a blessing to our friends, our community and ultimately the nations. Let us give thanks to God who loves such wayward creatures as we and let us continue to pray for the will, the wisdom and the love to bless the world as part of Christ's Body in this place. Amen.