

“Reckon”

Romans 4: 13 – 25

Makemie Presbyterian Church

March 8, 2009 Second Sunday of Lent

¹³For 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. ¹⁴If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null & the promise is void. ¹⁵For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. ¹⁶For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace & 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, ¹⁷as 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 & calls into existence the things that do not exist.

¹⁸Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what was said, “So numerous shall your descendants be.” ¹⁹He 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. ²⁰No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. ²²Therefore his faith “was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

²³Now the words, “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for his sake alone, ²⁴but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, ²⁵who was handed over to death for our trespasses & was raised for our justification.

This ends the reading.

For eight years now my vocation has been centered in the church Makemie. Since it takes almost every ounce of my energy to keep up with you all, I don't get out much. My lens on life is pretty much exclusively Christian, the Presbyterian variety because this is my clan. Together we speak of the church as the Christ's body, we speak of ourselves as God's family & I think it's fair to say that it doesn't cross many of our minds to think God might have more than one.

Then I went to a Presbytery even on evangelism & all of my old wineskins burst. There was simply no room in them for what I was learning about how big God's family really is. I discovered the depths of my ignorance about traditions other than my own. I learned about discipline in prayer & charity.

It took me back to my days at seminary when I was studying world religions; where my classmates confessed our worst fears had not come true. That the study of other religions had not made us believe in our own religion any less. Instead we began to see what

made our own faith distinctive, as well as what we have in common with people of other faiths. I think it made us for the most part less afraid of people who are different from us.

The day we studied the Hassidic movement in Judaism, a UT freshman from New York City was auditing the class. He smacked his head with his hand. "Yes, Eric?" our professor said.

"Man, I used to work in this video store & this guy would come in with these long curls hanging down in front & all I could think of was, 'man, get a haircut.'"

He said, "I didn't know. I wish I could find him again. I have a 100 questions I want to ask him."

At this Presbytery event I thought I want to find a way to do everything in my power to enable us to love our neighbors as ourselves. As Christians this will help us obey at least the second part of the Great Commandment. And it will help us to obey the Golden Rule, which shows up in some form or another in every religion I know about. It's an important goal for us & I believe – the peace of the world depends on us.

I know what you're thinking; no more Presbytery events for Debra.

Now some of you know that on September 11, John, Jaxon & I caught an early flight out of the Washington-Reagan airport. We were

almost to Tampa when the Captain came over the sound system saying,

“A plane has flown into the World Trade Towers. The FAA has ordered all flights to land at the nearest airport. You are fortunate that the closest airport is your destination. We will be on the ground in 15 minutes.”

As we taxied across the tarmac to the terminal – every plane not unloading passengers was pulled to the far edges of the pavement. Eerie in the brilliant sunlight of a fall tropical morning, nothing was in its proper place. It was quiet as we disembarked & then bedlam; thousands of stranded passengers trying to get their luggage, arrange transportation either to their home or destination. The PA system urging us to quickly leave the terminal – children crying, men yelling, women making eye contact with neon exit signs reflected in their irises.

My mother has sent a limo from the funeral home for us & we drove away feeling like refugees. When we arrived John’s family was on the phone, “Where are the kids” his mother wanted to know.

We had come to Florida to be with my mom for my stepfather’s funeral scheduled the next day; and in that space reserved for grief, we didn’t watch TV at all. Didn’t see the other tower go down; the New Yorkers fleeing Manhattan running across the bridges to the boroughs, the Pentagon’s roof collapsing, we were in the grief time bubble.

Two days later my mentor & former colleague the Rev. Lacy Harwell calls.

“Debra, the Interfaith Alliance has planned for months to attend a Muslim service at the Islamic Society of Tampa Bay’s Masjid Al Jami, Friday night. Many people have decided not to go. I think you should attend.”

“When did I give you this phone number?” I asked.

“Debra.”

“Lacy, I have a 3 year old, & I need to stay with my mother in her time of grief & I think I may be getting the sniffles.

“Debra.”

On the ride to the mosque, Lacy told me that the Masjid Al Jami had been welcoming the Interfaith Alliance for Friday prayers for many years. Lacy said it was important for me to go because our learning about religion by studying them in a book made about as much sense as learning about food by reading cookbooks. “The best way to learn about any faith, Debra, is to watch it work in the lives of those who practice it.”

The place was packed when we arrived at 2 p.m. & not just with worshippers but also with radio & newspaper reporters. I adjusted my head scarf & removed my shoes; the men went through their door; the women through theirs. The men sat up front with the brothers

while the women sat in back with the sisters. And all the children from the mosque school were there in their green & yellow uniforms.

The room grew fuller & fuller as people streamed in from their jobs. I saw people in police uniforms & surgical scrubs as well as tropical weight suits & blue jeans.

Finally the call to prayer began & we all waited to hear what the Imam would say in his teaching from the Koran. He warmed up slowly, aware of the hush in the room, the cameras, recorders, of how much depended on what he was about to say.

He began by reminding everyone that Islam means surrender & that the Muslims are people who have surrendered to God. "Just because people call themselves Muslims it does not mean a thing," he said, "it is their lives that tell the truth about whether or not they're Muslim."

Check; I thought that works for me, not only for this crowd but the crowd back home as well.

A little over an hour later he concluded by saying:

"The Koran teaches us that the world started out as one & will end as one; with one single soul called humanity. While terrorists of all kinds try to keep us separated into tribes & nations so hate we will hate one another, we are called to bear witness that there is one God one humanity one globe & what happens to one of us, happens to all of us."

It was the first sermon I heard of the events of that week & it is still the one I remember best.

Interfaith services took place all over the country that week & a phrase emerged in the press to describe these services; the Abrahamic religions they started calling them. Judaism, Christianity & Islam; three major world religions that trace their roots back to the same Great Grandfather Abraham.

It awakens great hopes & I might add great fears as to what it might mean for Abrahams far flung kin to recognize each other at Great Grand daddy's table.

As most of you know from personal experience family estrangements can be the absolute worst kind. Because families start out with so much in common: common home, a common history, common beliefs, common rituals; so when the parting of the ways come it messes with everyone's sense of what is really true. It throws the whole family system into chaos. The fastest track back to stability is for each side to create a new world of meaning that excludes the other. The family picture album is edited, so that certain photographs disappear from it. The family history is rewritten complete with stories about what was wrong with the other, which makes living together impossible. The stories aren't all true either. Some of them involved differences that are truly irreconcilable.

And in the stories of Abraham's kin, well they involve stories of such abuse & slaughter—you wonder if it will ever be possible to come to terms with them.

That is what makes Paul's letter to the Romans such a fascinating piece of scripture. The Apostle Paul who some scholars extol with having more to do with founding Christianity than Jesus ever did; Paul choose Abraham who was definitely not a Christian as his prime example of human faith.

You just heard a moment ago, Ted read what Paul writes in Romans, that "Abraham is the father of us all." Not only the Jews whom he fathered through his second son Isaac, but also the Muslims whom he fathered through his first son Ishmael & even the Christian gentiles who don't have one Abrahamic gene in their bodies but who are still his children by faith; or at least that is the case Paul is trying to make.

In the middle of the first century Paul was engaged in some Middle Eastern diplomacy that was almost as delicate as what is going on right now.

On one side he had faithful Jews, like himself, who had grown up following Torah, the law that God had given Moses on Mt. Sinai. Some of them believed that Jesus was the embodiment of those laws

but not that the laws themselves no longer mattered. Why would God give such a covenant & then say, "Oh, never mind."

On the other side Paul had a whole crowd of enthusiastic Gentiles who were wild about the Hebrew Messiah but who knew nothing about his religion. They ate pork chops. They went to chariot races on the Sabbath. They would not recognize a Menorah if it hit them on the head. The thing they had going for them was their trust that God had sent Jesus to make them members of God's family & they were ready to sign up.

Paul had a real challenge on his hands. Especially since he believed the end of the world was right around the corner. Then & the fact the Romans were throwing him in jail every other week for disturbing the peace. So: did he tell the Jews to forget about God's holy laws? Or did he send the Gentiles to Hebrew school to learn them? Did he side with the defenders of Moses or with the undisciplined Greeks?

In a deft theological move Paul did neither. Instead he reached back passed Jesus, back passed Moses, to tap Great Grandfather Abraham; who heard God's voice & followed God's call before there was every anything called Judaism or Christianity or Islam.

Before any of those religions existed, Paul said there was a human being who had nothing going for him but trust. Abraham was not. pray toward Mecca. He did not even know God's name. All Abraham knew was he was one of the oldest guys he knew, that he had no children and it like soon both he & his name would be as dead as dust.

Then Abraham heard a voice; asking him to trade in everything he could see for a lot of things he could not. If Abraham was willing to trust God's sense of direction more than he trusted his own, the voice said, then the journey would be full of life for him, full of descendants, full of blessing, & in him Abraham, whereby all the families of the earth would be blessed.

At this initial meeting God did not include that the journey would also include some really bad nightmares. Some close calls with various kings, dreadful, dreadful directions concerning both his sons that would bend his faith to the breaking point.

Abraham let God lead him with none of the helps that would come later; no creed, no sacred scripture, no priest or prophet to guide him. Abraham lived on trust in God alone – and that Paul said is what makes him father of all, he belongs to all who share his trust – just as they belong to him; whether they are descendants of his body, or descendants of his soul. God made Abraham's table big enough for everyone with none left over. There are no outsiders at Great Granddaddy's table.

A bold move on Paul's part was to point out what Abraham & Jesus had in common; they both staked their lives on trust in the same God; who chooses real human beings to change the course of human history; who keeps making promises & keeping them; who brings life to the dead. Trust in that kind of God, Paul thought provided grounds for a reunion. Jews & Gentiles to sit down to the table. Nothing about Islam of course. It would be another 700 years before the prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) would receive the revelation of the Koran; but when he did he like Paul would teach what united Abraham's children was deeper than what divided them. It was reckoned that we will recognize one another as kin. Amen.