



Sermon of June 6, 1999



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"ARE YOU TRYING TO PROVE SOMETHING?"

Genesis 12:1-9

Romans 3:21-28

Theodore Parker Ferris had a great impact on my life, at a time when that impact made a difference. I was a seminary student in Boston. Ferris was the rector of the famous Trinity Church in Boston, in Copley Square, one of the great churches in America. Ferris was one of the great preachers in his day.

He had a marvelous ability to present profound, sometimes difficult, ideas in very simple language that everybody could understand. And he was disarmingly honest. That was another characteristic of his style. He was not afraid to admit that he didn't have all the answers. That is hard for anybody to do, especially hard for a preacher to do, especially standing in a pulpit. But he would do that. He even stressed that there may not be answers to some difficult questions, and that is just something we have to live with. In fact, he suggested that the art of living is the

ability to live with unanswered questions.

Listening to him preach, you got the impression that he knew you, he understood what you were struggling with in your own life. He wasn't the expert, up there giving advice, nor was he proclaiming truth in absolute terms that had to be accepted. He was more like a guide, someone who has been there before you, and now graciously comes to join you.

He helped me to see that faith is not so much a matter of the intellect, where you know everything and have no doubts, but faith is a matter of the heart, where you trust someone, and you go on in spite of the doubts.

During those days, also in Boston, Paul Tillich, the great theologian, was teaching at Harvard. He had written that the best interpretation of what the Bible means by faith is the English word, "courage." He said that it was significant that that word comes from the French word for "heart." Underscoring the fact that faith is not about the brain, it is not about knowledge, but is about the heart, it's about action, it's about how you live your life.

Some years after that I came across an anecdote about Theodore Parker Ferris that brought this all together dramatically. It was given to me by Bob Davis, a colleague of mine in the ministry, who stumbled across it, and passed it on to me. It is a prayer that Ferris had written on the back of an American Airlines menu as he was flying back to Boston. It goes like this.

Lord Jesus, I would like to be able to do myself the things I help others to do. I can give them a confidence I do not have. I can quiet their anxieties, but not my own. What do I lack? Or is it the way I am made? I want to be free to move from place to place without fear. And I want to face the things to be done without panic. You did it, and you made it possible for others to do it. You didn't count on drugs. You trusted God. You didn't turn away from life. Nor did you seek pain or death. You met each as it came. I would like to do the same, but by myself I can't. I like to think that you can be with me, and in me, and that with your help I can do better. This is what I ask and hope for.

When I read that, I realized that I, too, have to face anxieties and doubts and tensions, having to do things that I really don't want to do, and having to live with things that I wish I hadn't done. And wanting to do better, wanting to be free of certain things, wanting to have peace in my life, praying that as I make my journey that God will be with me to guide me, Christ's spirit will be in me, and I will receive grace to be better.

If that is your situation, too, then I want you to see what the Bible says, that faith is not a matter of intellect. It is not a matter of providing you with all the answers. It is a matter of the heart. It's a matter of giving you courage to go on, trusting that God is with you in your journey.

That is the lesson from the Old Testament lesson read to us this morning from the Book of Genesis, the beginning of the story of Abraham and Sarah, revealing that faith means trusting God's providence over our lives. Abraham and Sarah, in their old age, were asked to leave their comfortable life in Ur of Chaldees. That incidentally is in present day Iraq. It's right in that valley between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. It is the "cradle of civilization." That's the home

they left. God called them to leave that life of ease and luxury, and become nomads, not knowing what the future was for them, but trusting the promise that God gave them, that the future would be good.

It takes only the slightest imagination to see in that story a paradigm of all human life. All human life is a matter of searching for the Promised Land. Your life and mine is a matter of moving from where we are now, often through some struggle or journey, to where we want to be. It takes only an accumulation of years to know that life is such that if you should reach a state where everything is finally the way you want it to be, and you are living now in your own Ur of Chaldees, the call may come for you to move into an unknown future, often a future that you don't want: Through the loss of a loved one, or a job, or through a divorce, or through something that causes you to leave where you are now. You have everything the way you want it. You've worked hard to get it this way. Then it happens. Life moves you on into an unknown future. When that happens, then we are all Abraham, and we are all Sarah, with a choice. We can hunker down in fear and resentment that this has happened to us, that life isn't fair, or we can go forth in faith, trusting that God keeps the promise.

In the old Methodist hymnal there was a wonderful hymn written by John Greenleaf Whittier. The older I get the more I discover that the hymns I love are all in hymnals that are out of print. In fact, I got a letter this week from Abingdon Press, informing me that my latest book is now going on their out of print list. They said they've got a few copies in the warehouse, wondered if I would like to buy them. I feel like writing them, and saying, "Why don't you try and sell them!" I got that, and I started thinking, my whole world is going out of print.

At any rate, Whittier's hymn is no longer in our hymnal. Which is too bad, because it was a wonderful, beautiful interpretation of this Abrahamic faith, this trusting in God's providence.

I know not what the future hath
Of marvel or surprise,
Assured alone that life and death
God's mercy underlies.

I know not where his islands lift
Their fronded palms in air;
I only know I cannot drift
Beyond his love and care.

That's the faith that Abraham and Sarah had. Faith is trusting God's providence over our future, that God would keep the promise.

One of the simplest affirmations of that Abrahamic faith was in a two line prayer written by Dag Hammarskjöld when he was General Secretary of the United Nations. It goes like this.

For all that has been: Thanks.
For all that will be: Yes.

Now go to the New Testament lesson, Paul's discussion of faith in his letter to the Romans.

Once again the definition of faith is the same as it was in Genesis, "trust." That's what faith means. Paul acknowledges, in fact, our indebtedness to Abraham by saying that Abraham is the father of all those who live by faith. Paul interprets that understanding of faith as trust for his own life. He says faith is trusting in God's grace alone.

In the Abraham story, faith is trusting in God's providence over the future. Paul's faith is trusting in God's grace right now. Abraham had to journey into an unknown future. Paul had to live with an uneasy conscience. To trust providence is to go into the future with courage. To trust grace is to believe that you are forgiven, right now, and that God loves you the way you are, right now, even if you don't feel loveable. Faith means that you trust that God loves you, so you can stop trying to be somebody, stop trying to prove something, stop trying to impress people, and be who you are as a child of God. That is what it means to live by grace. It means to be free to be who you are.

In Paul's day, the good life was an achievable goal. It was called "righteousness." Righteousness was defined as being right with God. There was a simple path to righteousness. It was called the Law. It consisted of over 600 rules, guidance for your daily living, dealing with everything from how you worshipped, to how you dressed, to how you interacted with your neighbors, to what you ate. With a little effort on your part you could obey those rules. You could fulfill the Law, and consider yourself righteous, consider that you had achieved the fulfillment of your life. So Paul sought that. He sought righteousness by following the Law.

And I submit that we live exactly the same way. We believe the way Paul believed about life. Not many of us would say that we are trying to achieve righteousness in our life, but we would say something like, we are trying to achieve success, or the American Dream, or peace of mind, or find the good life.

And we would probably not try to find it by keeping the Law, although we do look for rules to follow. We look for steps that will take us to the goal that we want to achieve. We don't have a Holiness Code, as the Jews did in the Old Testament, telling us what is kosher and what is unclean. But we do have dietary laws, like the Jews. Jewish dietary laws were given to them by Moses. Our dietary laws are given to us by Oprah.

Look at the bookstores. My goodness. The latest books on the bookshelves, always the same thing. You see it everywhere. Steps to success. Rules to follow in order to be rich. Goals, dreams, which if we could only achieve them, we believe, then we would be happy. And every one of those has a list of things that you must do, rules to follow, which are what Paul called the Law.

Ken Olson is a psychologist, lives in Arizona. He wrote that he lived his life, he sees now, as if he were living under a Law. He had to achieve all the time. He couldn't fail. He had to always win. If he failed, it was a devastating experience to him, because it would mean the loss of his self-esteem.

It wasn't until adulthood that he realized that his problem was really a religious problem. He was one of those who believed that religion really was about rules. It is about what you can do, and mostly about what you can't do. It wasn't until later that he discovered that the essence of

Christianity is not rules. The essence of Christianity is grace.

He told this story about his boyhood. He was a senior in high school. He was playing football. His coach demanded 100% from all of his players. He expected them to work hard. If you sat down in practice, you were punished. You had to run laps. If you drank water in practice, or in a game, you had to run laps. If you made a error, or fumbled, you had to run laps.

Olson was a defensive back on that team. In one of the first games of the year, the other team's end got behind him, caught a pass for a touchdown. What made it worse was, it was the touchdown that won the game.

Olson was humiliated. But that got worse, too. Because the next morning, on the front page of the sports section, was his picture, stretching to reach that pass, the ball going over his hands, into the hands of the receiver for a touchdown.

Now it is Monday morning. Olson goes to school. He hears the coach wants to see him. He enters the office. There is the picture from the newspaper on the desk. The coach says, "What do you have to say about this picture?" He said, "I'm sorry. I'll try harder." The coach said, "Look at the picture again. Look more closely. Look at your face. Look at your muscles, how tight they are. Can't you see, that's your problem. You are trying too hard. Why don't you just relax, have confidence in yourself, enjoy the game, and you'll be a great player."

That's Paul's problem, and its everyone's problem who lives under a law. You can't relax. In that New Testament that is called "the curse of the Law." You are always measuring yourself against some standard, your performance against other people's performances. You are afraid of what other people will think of you. Always trying to please someone, or something. That is what the Law is. The Law is some standard that is set above you, that judges you. Sometimes our parents set that standard for us. Sometimes we set it ourselves. Sometimes society sets it. Sometimes religion sets it. It doesn't really matter where it comes from, it doesn't matter what we call it, the Bible calls it the Law. It is that which, if we could only achieve it, promises happiness, and if we fail to achieve it, causes us misery.

Now these people who live under a Law are often great achievers. They are sometimes the most successful people in this world. Paul was that way. As a young man he became a Pharisee. The Pharisees were a community of people who took the Law seriously and focused their lives to achieve the Law. He rose to the top of the Pharisees. In his letters later he would call himself the "Pharisee of the Pharisees."

But then one day he met Christ, and he experienced grace. That is what he called it. He called it grace, because it meant that it was the experience of being loved when he didn't deserve it. He couldn't get over that. He had been trying all his life to achieve the love of God through the Law. He wanted God to love him. He kept trying, harder and harder, as hard as he could to make himself acceptable to God, to be righteous. All that effort, all it did was to make him miserable and mean.

But then he experienced love, the love of God. And I want to emphasize, he experienced it through Christians, the people he was persecuting. They loved him, even though he was the

enemy. He was hurt, wounded, taken to Damascus. There they cared for him, helped him in his healing, told him, "The Lord Jesus has sent us to you, and he loves you." He couldn't get over that. He was the enemy, and they loved the enemy. They loved, he said, the way God loves us, in spite of our sins, without deserving God's love. And that is when it hit him. That is why he wrote, "We are made righteous apart from the Law. We are saved not by our efforts, not by our works, but by our faith, our trust in God's grace."

I think that the grip of the Law is so tight on all of us that something often has to happen to us in order for us to let go, get us to relax, so that God can get a hold of us. Paul was that way, too. He had to get knocked down on the Damascus Road. He got hit by lightning, or something like that, something like getting whopped up on the side of the head. It got his attention. Only then, only when he was weak and helpless, could he understand that God was offering him not judgment, God was offering his love. The very thing he tried to earn was being offered to him freely.

John Wesley had a similar experience. Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church. He got whopped up on the side of the head, too, in an experience of failure. He had been a priest in the colony in Georgia, chaplain to the colonist. He behaved in a despicable manner. He refused to serve communion to people he didn't like. That caused him to be fired. They sent him back to England. That is a terrible experience for a perfectionist to go through, to fail. Somebody who believed that they could make their way through life by following the rules, by being perfect. It didn't work. He failed. Wesley's failure, and resultant depression, opened his heart to listen, for the first time, to what he had heard over and over again, the words that Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, that "we are saved not by works of the Law, but by faith, trusting in God's grace alone."

There is a story about Daddy Hall. He was an Episcopal priest in Mississippi in the 1920s. He was an eccentric man, and unpredictable as a preacher. On this occasion he was invited to preach to an ecumenical service in Oxford, Mississippi. It was the Presbyterians turn to host this annual service.

Daddy Hall got up to preach. He noticed that there was a couple sitting in the front row, upright, stern, rigid. The woman especially so. She had her eyes fixed straight ahead, her hands folded in her lap. They looked like two ironing boards sitting there. They looked like Presbyterians, actually.

He interrupted his sermon, walked down the steps, stood right in front of that woman. In a voice that everybody could hear, because this was for everyone, he was still preaching, he said, "Ma'am, have you ever seen a cat carry her kittens?"

No response. The woman just sat, starred straight ahead.

"Well you know," he says, "the kitten has to let go. The kitten has to slump, like this." Then he bent over at the waist, his arms hanging down in front of him. Then he stood up again to his full height, and he said, "Relax ma'am. That's the only way God is going to get a hold of you."

That is what Paul learned. He had to go through a physical crisis. We can call it a breakdown.

He had to go through a breakdown before he could let go, and let God.

Wesley had to go through a failure. He had to go through some humiliating experience in his life before he could drop his guard, and let go. But when he did, when he stopped trying to impress God, or anybody else, that is when God could get a hold of him.

"For we are saved not by our works, but by our faith in God's grace."

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,
that we might be servants of others,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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