

Pentecost V (A)  
*Genesis 18.1-15/Romans 5.1-8/Matthew 9.35-10.8*  
St. Paul's Church, Halifax  
15 June 2008

### **GIVING IT AWAY**

~Paul H. Friesen~

The last words of this morning's Gospel gather us up just where they left us last Sunday.

We talked about grace in the story of Abraham, and in our lives. When it comes to true love, God always gets there before we do. God made us after all, and loved us all when we'd turned our back on him, and died for us when push came to shove.

Whatever it is we are to do, however it is we are meant to live, it only really makes sense for Christians if it begins and ends as a simple response to God's love—an act of gratitude, not an attempt to 'pay God back'. This is to live the life of faith, like a child who offers his father or mother a drawing that won't end up in a gallery, but is received with joy. It is a sign of that child's faith in her parents

If we start somewhere else—if we try to begin the life of faith in sheer will power, or if we try to begin by getting what we deserve, or by getting what we think we're entitled to, or by blaming others we will make the lives of the people around us (in our families, our parish, our lives) more complicated and less happy. But whenever we approach each other from the love of God that got to us before we got to God, then we make each other happier and each others' lives less complicated.

And so Jesus said: 'As you go, proclaim the good news, "The Kingdom of God has come near." Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.' Do the disciples want to follow Jesus? This is where he wants to take them.

Hang on a second. It is true that Jesus said this to the disciples, his chosen few, the mighty saints of old. Maybe they're not words for all of us.

But do you know what? At the beginning, where many of us are, and at the hour of Jesus' death (where we all are many times) the disciples were like the crowds at the top end of today's Gospel: 'harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.'

Look at the list of names: Matthew was a shady tax-collector squeezing all he could out of rich and poor while he collaborated with the invading

Romans. Simon was a 'zealot' (not best translated 'Cananaean'), that is he had belonged to a terrorist group fighting for an independent Israel, and Judas sold out and betrayed Jesus and the rest. The others weren't distinguished by much. Except for James and John who got it all wrong and had their mother petition Jesus to be officially nominated as Jesus' vice-kings 'after the revolution'. Except for Peter who, at Jesus' trial three times denied he'd ever heard of Jesus.

What a crew! But Jesus had compassion on them all, as Jesus has compassion on us. And we need it for the life of faith.

Still we might feel the life of faith is daunting, cut out for spiritual super heroes—perhaps with other personalities or in other sorts of churches. It's easy for they eye to pick up only the glittering images and the glittering words, in today's Gospel isn't it? 'Cure, raise, cleanse, cast out...' said Jesus.

They're all wonderful things, of course! Some church somewhere has them enshrined in a mission statement, I'm sure. But it's all meaningless unless...unless we hear the very last words of the Gospel, and live by them: 'You received without payment; give without payment.'

So here's where we must begin however harassed or helpless we might feel. But we can't give away what we haven't been given. So says, Jesus, give away what you have been given—attention, affection, time, money—not something that someone else has been given, that some other church has been given. And each of us here has been each given so much, and this parish has been given what might be called an 'embarrassment of riches', of the widest variety.

The verses from *Romans* and *Genesis* tell us how to do it. That is, they tell us how to live by faith, responding to God's gifts to us.

St. Paul said 'Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand.'

What is this grace, this gift from God? St. Paul says: 'God proved his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.' 'Still sinners'! It's pretty straightforward: no-strings attached divine love.

What about faith? Faith is the channel, the means by which we experience God's grace and live in divine peace.

So how does the life of faith, the experience of divine peace work out? St. Paul's said: 'we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character

produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts.'

What, we ask, God's love doesn't deliver us *from* our suffering? Not quite. God's love delivers us *through* our suffering. To live in faith is to live as if our suffering was going somewhere, as if it had a purpose, because it does.

To live through suffering in faith is to see suffering produce endurance produce character produce hope. We've met people like that haven't we? Their trials have made them into beautiful people, whose lives are a pilgrimage of faith.

And we've seen those whose trials have made them bitter, still waiting for all they believe they are entitled too, for all that God owes them. These folks are not to be mocked—some have suffered astonishingly. But we are all invited by grace into the life of faith instead. 'Freely ye have received, freely give,' as our verse is put in the old *King James Version*.

And so we return to the life of Abraham, many chapters after last Sunday's lesson from *Genesis*. How has it been going for the great man of faith and for his wife Sarah? How have they arrived at this moment with the three heavenly visitors, imagined by Rembrandt? [show PP slide].

We began with the promise of the Lord to Abraham and Sarah. They left one of the cradles of human civilization—the Mesopotamian river valley—a civilization absorbed with itself, a culture full of envious gods fighting ambitious humans, full of divine pay-backs and human pay-offs—ritual prostitution, infants placed on fiery altars, and more.

Abraham's clan heard God's call to a life of faith in a new land. The Lord spoke to Abraham and promised him a child, promised him to be the father of a nation of faith which could live simply in response to the love of God.

To say the least the going has been tough. And the promise has been slow to come. The clan has headed to Egypt during a season of famine. So frightened has Abraham been of the Pharaoh, that he tries to pass off Sarah as his sister should the Pharaoh want to ill him and take his woman of great beauty into his harem. You'd think Sarah's pregnancy by a pagan king would be a bit of a problem given the promise that Abraham was to be the father.

And then Sarah says to Abraham: 'For goodness sake, stop moping about. I'll never be pregnant. Sleep with my handmaid, and we'll call the child our own.' Abraham didn't resist for long. It wasn't so shocking in an ancient world full of men with concubines. But it was a bit of a problem when it

came to enjoying the promise of God to Abraham and Sarah, and it was full of terrible complications as the book of *Genesis* shows.

And yet the Lord keeps appearing to Abraham in the midst of it all, and Abraham walks on in faith with Sarah. The life of faith is not without sin—but suffering is producing endurance which is producing character which is producing hope which does not in the end disappoint them, as St. Paul said.

Hope does not disappoint them, because as the Apostle said, God's love had been poured into their hearts.

The three visitors appear. Abraham and Sarah seem to know as soon as they arrive that they are signs of something from God—something big. Rembrandt captures it.

Abraham is attentive to every need—pushing eastern hospitality to the limit, attending to details as a servant would, personally selecting the food, and then he watches as they eat under the oak trees at Mamre, while Sarah hovers nearby at the entrance to their tent. Rembrandt has captured their fear and their hope. This is no ordinary meal.

This time the promise is specific—'in due season, by this time next year the two of you shall have a child.' Their hope has not been pointless. Sarah can't quite believe it; she is far too old. She laughs within. The most distinguished guest who is by now revealed as an appearance of the Lord himself, says: 'Why did she laugh?' Sarah finally enters the conversation—'I didn't actually laugh!' she protests. And God says, 'Oh, but you did laugh.' I think we've all had conversations like this with God.

But God does not judge Abraham and Sarah unfaithful. They have wobbled on the way, but they have welcomed God back into their life, and offered the best of their hospitality in good faith. And God takes their laugh of astonishment and turns it into a laugh of joy, a child. 'Isaac', after all, is the word for laughter.

'Freely ye have received, freely give.' God is faithful, and offers us opportunities, time and again, to continue on in the life of faith.

We are given the raw stuff of life by God the creator. We are given the promise of never-ending grace through Jesus Christ our redeemer. And we know it through the presence of the Holy Spirit, our sanctifier—that is, the presence of God in our lives who takes our suffering and offers us endurance, who takes our endurance and offers us character, who takes our character and offers us hope, which won't disappoint us.

To live the life of faith, we can't demand things—money, success, children, health. But the life of faith is always lived in the light of the embarrassment of riches offered to each of us. This is why, as our ancestors in the faith, we

eat bread and drink wine when we gather, so that no matter how thick-headed we are at whatever moment, we will be continuously confronted with God's grace to us in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and always comforted in our life of faith.

To live in light of that divine grace, is the life of faith. To see in suffering God's gift to live in endurance is *an act of faith*; to see in endurance God's offering to build character is *an act of faith*; to find in the building of our character signs of hope in our faithful God—this too is *an act of faith*, a step in the life of faith.

God will not disappoint us, even when we disappoint ourselves, and when we disappoint each other.

'We have received without payment; let us give without payment'—these are the words that are the most helpful at each step of the life of faith. They under-gird our life of faith together, the life of the stewardship of all our gifts—our time, money, abilities. This is how suffering becomes endurance becomes character becomes hope. We give away what we do have at the moment, because it is all a gift of God. Amen.