12 March 2017 Nutana Park Saskatoon

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? 2For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3For what does the scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” 4Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. 5But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. For 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 and 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 and 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, as 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 and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

**Sermon: Reckoned as Righteousness**

Certain words capture our gaze at certain times in our lives. It wasn’t so much my gaze, but the whole resonating chamber of the body’s speaking apparatus that came to life in a certain phrase from the Romans passage from today’s lectionary reading: reckoned as righteousness.

Reckoned – has a guttural, gritty sound

* Phonics: reck – wreck – with the w, or even reckless – connection of reckless and reckoned? – etymology – worth investigation, as well as biblical translations
* Sensibility of incredulous – not quite believable when say reckoned with a long first syllable
  + I reckon we’ll be there – the will is resisting…yet the commitment is true – some element has some measure has made persuasive or changed the will that earlier was going in a different direction.

The term reckoned – by definition, to establish through calculation, square up, considered assessment based on some measure, credibility of opinion on what is true – fairly innocuous –

* “calculations” – often assume well-established system and understandings

Yet in text:

* reckoned as righteousness – clearly not a simple calculation based in already existing criteria or understandings – not merely payment as if due…there’s a missing element if mere expectation or defined contract
* but – redemption – restored or restoried – faith resting on grace that makes it so – quality of faith… grace… transformation…

Romans passage – quotes Genesis 15:6; traces lives reckoned as righteous to those who share the faith of Abraham – that he believed God – and therein also to all his descendants…who also believed God.

* Or as writers of biblical commentaries in Anabaptist tradition tell us – who faithed God – absolute trust in God – living faithfully – not of our own doing – works or law – yet not apart from these either
* Quoting Gen 15:6 – Abraham believed God…and this was reckoned to him as righteousness
* For Paul in Romans – speaking against ethnic pride – righteousness by faith…not ethno-religious identity as symbolized in cultural code of law

As ponder the phrase, “reckoned as righteous,” a phrase we likely don’t use a lot in our everyday lives, I invite you to wonder with me how it relates to a phrase that floods today’s air.

In the past year or so I’ve become intrigued by expressions of a growing consensus – that clarity of conscience and right action can be known and enacted. The expression “Make a difference” as an emblem of societal virtue is all but yesterday’s language, and the phrase, “just do the right thing” now more often takes the stage.

Listen for that phrase, pronouncement really, as you go about your days, and notice how often it elicits a nodding of heads. See how often it rolls off your own tongue, why you utter it, and what happens when you do.

There are skeptics, of course, who for good and bad reasons flinch when they hear “just do the right thing,” wondering how, with the myriad of possibilities in a complex world, there is something that simply can be called "right action,” and how certain ones of us are capable of locating this “right thing" and choosing to do it.

I’ll admit I often catch myself confusedly nodding and shaking my head all at once. I respect the phrase as a call to ethics and action, and I’m heartened to see right action connected with commitment and wisdom, and also to see that loose relativism is not the dominant expression of the times.

Still I’m troubled by the thought that just nodding our heads along to the pronouncements of whomever has the mic is sufficient evidence of the right thing….

* Whether regarding relationships amongst First Nations, Inuit, and Metis peoples and settler, refugee, and migrant peoples in this country…or exponentially increasing debt loads for individuals and nations, climate change, a groaning earth, economic disparity, food security, human sexuality, growing political polarities, loneliness and anxiety run rampant, brash confidence without a counterweight of humility, need for sustainable livelihoods amongst peoples everywhere, and a church described as “in transition,” which seems code for we haven’t a clue what we’re up to, where we’re going – and likely not naming where we’re coming from very well either…

Nourished by the calling of lives reckoned as righteousness, I invite you to taste and see the right thing – that which might be reckoned as righteousness – as break God’s word open together: jump into the stories we tell and talk with the characters until we’re attuned to righteousness and justice and equity, until wisdom comes into our hearts and knowledge is pleasant to our souls. Do this with all the big questions we face as people and peoples of God.

For this morning – explore through two texts, one is Hebrews 11-12 which I’ll refer to and ask that you read sometime this week, and the other from I Kings, a text I’ll read with interjections.

Begin with Heb. 12:1 – Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us look to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.

Image of cloud of witnesses – story of lives that nourish – clouds rain – lives of witnesses rain on us – some of what comes up through us looks the same as earlier lives – as perennials – others look very different as the soil cultivated in new ways, as new combinations of plants and creatures share the same space…

Therefore of the call to look to – to follow Jesus – as surrounded, as nourished by the cloud of witnesses are the stories told in Hebrews 11, women and men whose lives were reckoned as righteous as they were commended for these things: Forming relationships, habits and decisions on the basis of trust and not out of fear, and for practising faithfully what they could not perfect or bring to completion on their own.

Hebrews 11 tells stories like these. Miriam, the sister of a baby named Moses was touched by his beauty, chose not to be afraid, and went and hid him in the bulrushes. And many years later Moses himself stood up for the welfare of an oppressed people rather than securing personal safety and success. Neither Miriam nor Moses assumed such a thing as perfect conditions in which to make the right move.

My two favourite of the witnesses:

Abraham – “therefore through one man, and **this one as good as dead**,…” as he led the way to a land lying beyond the grasp of his dreams – almost humorous, contemporary sounding phrase – to express remarkable reckoning as righteous as he trusted and followed beyond what he could control – or would benefit from personally.

The other:

The people of Israel passed through the red sea not because it was but *as if it were* dry land. The phrase “as if it were” is a mostly unfamiliar claim to truth. Here’s an experience that helped me to see why we need this odd expression to live with the whole of our beings.

Once upon a time I heard a fine musician proclaim from the stage she was playing the “most beautiful music in all the world.” My first impulse was to scream, “bbbbbut what about….?” My second impulse was a sad plea: “couldn’t you just invite us to listen *as if it were* the most beautiful music in all the world? That way so much more would be at stake, in need of care and persuasive in this very moment, and so much else would be true as needed in other times and places.”

What I glean is that reckoned as righteousness by resting in faith has nothing to do with taking foolish risks, living without conviction, cutting corners, or being “ahead of the times.” Instead it means trusting the truths revealed through God’s spirit…when we break open the scriptures together or come to understand through other canons in creation…with this proviso: as if there were always something or someone at stake.

* For that is when our understanding are worthy of garnishing with rigorous intellect, fervent imagination, dexterous skill and grace-filled action – and that is when the right thing we see is reckoned as righteousness…
* And that is when we recognize our best understandings as always incomplete and ever requiring new places in which to take root and flourish, or else to rest and be revisioned anew.

Reckoned as righteousness…as if there were something or someone at stake – may sound way too loose or impossible to adjudicate…so I offer witness by telling a story of wisdom from the third chapter of the First book of Kings. It’s a good story, good in the sense that it has more than one thing to say, and it calls forth truths that do not rest in a single character. It’s a story that teaches trust beyond what we can see and where we feel caught.

I Kings 3:16-28: Later, two women who were prostitutes came to the king and stood before him.

Wait. Later than what? Well, this is just after we read that God appeared to Solomon in a dream and said, “Ask what I should give you,” and Solomon said a wise and discerning mind, able to discern between good and evil, and then provided a feast for all his servants, which may well have been an unusual act of generosity.

And, why define the women as prostitutes? Sure, stories need to entice the listener, but ought never to stoop to gratuitous defamation of character. The prostitute bit is peculiar in the shadow of a king with a questionable portfolio of foreign affairs – for Solomon loved many foreign women, and among his wives were 700 princesses and 300 concubines.

Or, was it remarkably subversive for the King to bother to hear prostitutes in 970 BC? Was it in the wisdom of God that Solomon received them as mothers even if their babies were conceived for pay, not committed relationships of love? Back to the story.

17The one woman said, “Please, my lord, this woman and I live in the same house; and I gave birth while she was in the house.18Then on the third day after I gave birth, this woman also gave birth. We were together; there was no one else with us in the house, only the two of us were in the house. 19Then this woman’s son died in the night, because she lay on him. 20She got up in the middle of the night and took my son from beside me while your servant slept. She laid him at her breast, and laid her dead son at my breast. 21When I rose in the morning to nurse my son, I saw that he was dead; but when I looked at him closely in the morning, clearly it was not the son I had borne.”

22But the other woman said, “No, the living son is mine, and the dead son is yours.” The first said, “No, the dead son is yours, and the living son is mine.” So they argued before the king.

23Then the king said, “The one says, ‘This is my son that is alive, and your son is dead’; while the other says, ‘Not so! Your son is dead, and my son is the living one.’” 24So the king said, “Bring me a sword,” and they brought a sword before the king.25The king said, “Divide the living boy in two; then give half to the one, and half to the other.”

Wait. What do you think Solomon thought he was doing? Did he intend to follow through on his word and murder the baby boy? Could he have known he’d be stopped by someone with enough guts and mostly enough love to stand up to him and propose an alternative? Did he have another option up his sleeve?

The story doesn’t provide an account of Solomon’s mind. We can’t tell if he thought killing innocent children or uttering murderous threats were the right things to do so that warring, hurting people would share pain and justice in equal measure. The text simply says that Solomon’s suggestion was refuted, and from there the first woman is no longer defined as a prostitute but as a mother. For we read, But the woman whose son was alive said to the king—because compassion for her son burned within her—“Please, my lord, give her the living boy; certainly do not kill him!”

Let’s define Solomon’s wisdom this way…he empowered the real mother so that she could move from possessive, spiralling, stalemate arguments like “the living son is mine and the dead son is yours” to a simple witness to the truth of her character.

Make no mistake, though, she took an enormous risk. Think about it:

* She released what was rightfully hers in order to save her son’s life
* She risked people thinking she didn’t really care – wasn’t really the mom
* she was willing to entrust her child to a woman she knew to be a baby thief and a liar in order to let the one she loved live.

This releasing and trusting the untrustworthy has grabbed me and given we new eyes to see. Would we today call this mother’s suggestion the right thing? Or would we say she compromised her human rights and her God given responsibilities by proposing a questionable solution? Might we even say that the true mother’s despair drove her to prostitute herself?

Earlier in the passage – called a prostitute – word sometimes used figuratively – equated with compromising the purity of the things we do or are entrusted with – to do something differently or for some other purpose than what’s considered the original intent or good

* to sell out, do something for material gain or popularity or even as an act of grace
* Any perceived lack of purity of principle and action can be seen as prostituting oneself. Artists, athletes and academics, amongst others, are accused of “prostituting themselves” for selling their souls for goods – eg., let someone play on a team who isn’t as skilled as other players – cut out a third of a soliloquy b/c want to keep audience with you

Could ask: What kind of cheap mother would release her son rather than hold her ground on what was right and righteous by insisting that she keep the boy…

* in church – concept of prostituting ourselves before God used if accuse others of selling out to culture – urgent need to interrogate this one carefully when looking for what’s right and feel compromised no matter which way we turn.

Let’s get back to the story.

The second woman also disrupts how it unfolds. She refuses the first woman’s offer of the warm, breathing boy. Why didn’t she take him? The impetus for the story was precisely that – she wanted this baby.

* Perhaps she couldn’t bear the burden of indebtedness to the true mother – unable to accept a good that came without reason. Her preferred option was to make things fair for both of them, which meant uniformly bad. For she said, “It shall be neither mine nor yours; divide it.”

So Solomon had two options – his first as affirmed by the second woman, or to give the baby to the second woman, as suggested by the first. He didn’t follow through with either one. Instead he said: “Give the first woman the living boy; do not kill him. She is his mother.”

The text continues: All Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered; and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him, to execute justice.

* In other words, the people perceived that wisdom of God had empowered Solomon to “just do the right thing,” – to taste and see a mother’s love – to trust her story and her character as righteous.
* Seen as wisdom – know when to trust an act of love, even if others might have seen her action as strange

As I jump back from the story I’m left with another thought: Solomon could do his right thing and come up with a third option because the mother did her right thing – she followed the compulsion of her love and trusted one she had sound reason to doubt.

She tasted – in her mind’s eye – the gut wrenching revulsion for the baby to be divided – and she saw the possibility of trusting the other woman as a way of saving the boy’s life.

This hits me hard – do I ever allow what I’m entrusted to love to take me to the point of releasing that person or that calling to people I don’t consider trustworthy?

Consider as:

* Inexperienced – students – children – cooking or setting up tent – leave a mess of flour and water slopping all over the place, more work, doesn’t taste good, break things, leave a mess…
* Proven untrustworthy – not a benevolent or patronizing act – trusted because recognized and admitted that within her own control her love was doomed – yet as a mother entrusted with so much love – saw his only chance of survival to lie in releasing rather than holding firmly to what she knew to be true…

It is my prayer that our ears will be attentive to the courage of such trust and grow our faith muscles to trust one another and estranged peoples in new and profound ways…

* even and especially when that trust stretches our sensibility for knowledge and understanding,
* even when it means holding together a diversity of convictions within the grace and truth of Jesus.

In all things may the reconciling love of God’s infinite wisdom be reckoned as righteousness in all that flows through you. Amen

SING – *Taste and See*