



“God’s Promises for All”

Text: Romans 4:13-25

a sermon by Jerusha Van Camp

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

When I was a child, my best friend, who lived next door, and I would make up clubs. Every good club has rules, and our number one rule was, “No boys allowed”. Now this rule was directly targeted at my little brother, and it became a game. My little brother would spend all of his time trying to break into our club. In his efforts, he would recruit our little sister to help him break into our club, and my friend and I would expand our exclusion and change the rules to, “no siblings allowed” (my best friend was an only child) thus thwarting any attempt by either of them to breach our exclusive club. Eventually, our insistence that they could not be part of our club led to tears and hurt feelings, and we would feel sorry for how we made them feel and erase all of our rules and welcome them in, and they were so happy, and we were too.

We all need those friends in our lives for whom we don’t have to put on makeup or clean the house. Friends that we like. Friends that are easy. Friends with whom we share much in common. We all have our inner circle that are composed of these friends. I call my inner circle my “board of directors”. They are the ones I trust to be there on my worst days to give me honest and wise advice. These are the friends that make life truly sweet.

What about everyone else? I have had friends who could only take and never had anything to give. I have had friends who I learned could not keep secrets. I have had friends for whom I was in the 2nd or 3rd tier. I was not a part of their inner circle and was somewhere between a friend and an acquaintance. I learned early in life that I couldn't be all things to all people all the time. The famous line from a poem that you may have heard sums it up this way, "People come into your life for a reason, a season or a lifetime."

As people of faith, we are on a road trip with God. A journey with a destination unknown, just like Abram. We trust that God knows where we are going though we can not see it. Like Abram, a road trip with God means leaving the familiar places of our foreparents so that we can go to a new and unfamiliar land. Along the way, like Abram, we have and we will build altars to remember what God has done until God calls us to move on again.

The church has a history of deciding who can be "in the club" and who can't. Granted, not everyone who claims Jesus as their Lord and Savior lives a life committed to his cause, but that doesn't mean we get to be their judge. There are many who would adamantly argue with you that women shouldn't preach, and queer people can not be Christians. The fact of the matter is that we do not get to say who gets in and who does not. We do not get to decide who God calls to walk alongside of us on this journey. We cannot make God stingy and exclusive like we can be. God defies the narrowness of the human mind and opens their arms out wide to the whole world with no exceptions. This is the essence of grace, that is a gift from God. We cannot earn it or impact it in any way. It is the nature of God to extend God's grace and mercy to us, because of who God is.

Our passage from Romans speaks of faith and God's promises this way, 'If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.' I am going to take the liberty of paraphrasing this verse and say that if we are the ones deciding who is eligible to be heirs of God's promises, then faith is useless. God's grace is not about who deserves it, because in truth, who among us does?

What does that do to our “club” and our faith community if we act like Jesus and let anyone in? What happens when we proclaim that God’s promises of grace and redemption are for everyone? Well, it gets complicated and messy. Each person that we embrace and welcome is going to come with their questions, their wounds, their doubts, their ignorance, and a different way of doing things and that can be challenging. When I first came to First Pres I didn’t have much to give. My heart was broken. I didn’t even know if God existed anymore. There were plenty of times when I was more of a liability than an asset to this congregation, but the Spirit of God drew me here, and greatly in part due to your welcome and acceptance, here is where I healed and grew.

God’s promises are for everyone, gay and straight, Jew and Gentile, Protestant and Catholic, Asian, African, American, Palestinian, Russian, Ukrainian, mobility challenged, neuro divergent, those with great faith, and those with little faith, and on and on we can add to the list, because it is God’s church, God’s table, God’s spirit, God’s love. God chooses us, and as the church, it is our calling to love, to embrace, and to care for the people God invites to join us in the journey.

The most uncomfortable part of any journey is the unknown. We trust God, but it sure would be nice to know something about our destination. You are in luck! Today, I’m going to tell you what that destination is. Are you ready? Our destination is faith.

One of my favorite Scriptures about faith is found in Hebrews 11:1 and I memorized this verse in the King James Version when I was a teenager, and so I’m going to share that version with you, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Faith is not ambiguous. Faith has substance. Faith is a tangible destination. Faith is interlinked with hope. By faith, we hope for the things we have not yet seen. This is God’s destination for us, to grow strong in our faith and in spiritual maturity so that we are strong and able to keep step with God as we journey with God.

How do we do this? How do we build our faith? What is the exercise routine for growing strong in our faith in God? The *Bellhar Confession* gives us a “few” suggestions to choose from:

This gift of God that is grace by faith “must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practice, and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptized with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope; together come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ; together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity; together know and bear one another’s burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ that we need one another and upbuild one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity.”

My challenge to you today is to have faith and believe in God’s promises for you, for me, for us, and for this world. Hold fast to hope, that God’s destination for us is good. I also challenge you: do not neglect gathering together in community for worship and the partaking of the Sacraments. Do not neglect the reading of Scripture. Do not neglect a practice of prayer and communion with God. It is in walking alongside each other within our faith community that our faith is strengthened, and we are nourished and refreshed.

Romans 4:20-21 says, “No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what God had promised.” In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Mother of us all. Amen.



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