### “The Obedience of Faith” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Dec. 18, 2022

**Romans 1:1–7**

1Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, 2which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, 3the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh 4and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, 5through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, 6including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

7 To all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

**Luke 1:26–32, 38**

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. 28And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” 29But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” . . . 38Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

Welcome on the fourth Sunday of Advent. The theme is love. The Scripture passages don’t talk about love, but they could be taken as *examples* of love: Paul’s love of the Savior, and Mary’s love of God, which made her accept the assignment that was being given to her.

Let’s start with Mary. She is greeted by Gabriel who comes with a message. She is a little uneasy, wondering “what sort of greeting this might be” (1:29). Gabriel tells her not to worry, but she has been chosen to bear “the Son of the Most High . . . of [whose] kingdom there will be no end” (1:32–33). Of course, she is shocked, but she knows she needs to give a response, and she says, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (1:32). This is an astounding answer, since it expresses only acceptance, no dismay or disbelief. I think this really serves as an example of “the obedience of faith” (Rom 1:5), the concept that is so important to Paul and which we see in verse 5 of his passage.

Here we have the prescript, a kind of preamble, of Paul’s letter to Romans. He speaks of the Son being descended from David according to the flesh, and identified as Son of God through his holiness, manifested especially in his resurrection from the dead. It is from Jesus that Paul received his “apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles” (1:5). That phrase, “the obedience of faith,” is one that characterizes *all* of Paul’s teaching. He teaches that real obedience and loyalty is through faith, and not through willpower or through the intention of strictly adhering to the law. Faith is the new way of living, and it happens to *enable* obedience.

Faith really means trust, so it means trusting in God and God’s Son. The letter to the Colossians speaks of “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col 1:27). When one has this relationship, faith becomes like a power within oneself. One has in his heart the power to believe, which gives him the power to do right, and then to speak “the word of Christ” (Rom 10:10, 17). Paul definitely teaches that we should do good, but he does not believe that we earn salvation that way. Rather, salvation is a gift given to those who believe, who are then empowered with righteousness and with the power to preach (10:9–10). This obedience is the obedience of faith because it arises from faith. First a person hears the gospel, then the person accepts the word “in your heart” (10:8), he says; then the person is saved and is empowered to do good and to preach truth.

The obedience is not slavish. It is partnering as much as it is obedience, because one brings an element of one’s own creativity into the relationship. One becomes a creative partner of God. For Paul, the only true righteousness is the one that comes as a byproduct of faith. Faith can become like an inner compass that guides one throughout life. It is the only reliable compass. But since the basis of faith is trust, one could say that love comes first. Love leads one to trust, and trust is faith. Then faith leads to righteousness.

Perhaps we could say Mary first heard the word from the angel, then accepted that in her heart and then agreed to obey, to raise this Son of Promise, as was asked of her. Of course, she also brings in her own creativity and her own thoughtfulness as a mother, in raising this son. She acts out of faith, and cooperates with God.

How do we manifest this in *our* lives? If we learn to love others as Jesus loves us, then we are learning *mature* love. It is not a clinging and needy love, but respectful, grown-up love. It includes love of the highest values, love of justice, truth, fairness, and beauty. We care about the long-term good of others. We cooperate with the will and the way of God to the best of our ability, and that makes us co-creators with God. The obedience of faith is also the creativity of spiritualized imagination. The obedience of faith is entrance into partnership with God, with the truth of God, the fairness of God, the beauty and harmoniousness of God. It means joining with God to the best of our ability and knowledge, and trusting God to help us do better every day.

I encourage you to say to God: “Let it be with me according to your word. I will encourage fairness and goodness, truth and harmony, in all that I do. Let me be an instrument of your peace, O God.”