### “Faith As Righteousness” Steve Finlan for The First Church, February 25, 2024

**Romans 4:13–16, 21–22**

13For 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.

16 For 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 [all]).

21. . . being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. 22Therefore his faith “was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

**John 3:5–10**

5Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 8The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” 9Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” 10Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

Welcome back to First Church. Always a pleasure to meet with new friends and old as we renew our faith in the school of love.

Of course, the sermon today will have something to do with religious living. It always does. Among other things, it will look at what is meant by *faith*. Faith is fundamentally *trust*, and it basically means trust in a person, the way you trust your mom or dad. We’ll come back to this. Let’s start with the reading from Paul, and what he says in his letter to believers living in Rome.

Paul has a bone to pick with the law, that is, the Torah. You can tell that right away from this passage, although you may not immediately discern all the details of his argument. His first point is that the great promise to Abraham did not come through the law, but was fulfilled because of his faith. Abraham believed the promise that he and his elderly wife Sarah would have a son and heir, and it is because he *believed* this promise that he was deemed righteous.

He was promised that they would have a son, that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky, and then Genesis says “he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness” (15:6). Genesis is the first book of the Bible, and it is where Abraham’s story is found. The Lord acknowledging Abraham’s trust is a key point, in Paul’s understanding of Genesis. It is because of Abraham’s faith that he was reckoned righteous. And that is *still* the pattern. And for us, too, it is our faith that allows us to be reckoned righteous.

It took the faith and character of *two* men to break the color barrier in baseball. Branch Rickey, the General Manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, decided to start looking for a black player to be the first to play in the Major Leagues since Moses Fleetwood Walker played a single season for Toledo in 1884. Rickey wanted to get access to a new pool of good players, but he also wanted to confront the racism in baseball. He often quoted the motto he learned in his family: “Make first things first, seek the Kingdom of God, and make yourself an example” ([The 'ferocious Christian gentleman' behind Jackie Robinson's famous moment | Prince on Preaching (davidprince.com)](https://www.davidprince.com/2015/04/15/the-ferocious-christian-gentleman-behind-jackie-robinsons-famous-moment-2/#:~:text=Biographer%20Murray%20Polner%20described%20Rickey%20as%20a%20conservative,Kingdom%20of%20God%2C%20and%20make%20yourself%20an%20example.%E2%80%9D)). Rickey chose Jackie Robinson to be the player. In his first meeting with Robinson, Rickey made it clear to Robinson that he was going to face a lot of hostility, and that he needed to be able to not retaliate. Robinson agreed, and, despite the razzing in every ballpark in which he played, Robinson excelled, was the Rookie of the Year for 1947, and came in 5th in MVP voting. Most Americans were ready for integration. After Ben Chapman, the manager of the Phillies, taunted Robinson, Herb Pennock, the Phillies general manager, forced Chapman to pose for a picture with Robinson. Robinson’s teammates, including the southerner Pee Wee Reese, ended up being very supportive. Robinson remained a fierce competitor, but didn’t get into fights and didn’t retaliate, even when pitchers threw at his head. He just asked that people respect him, and he wanted all black folks to be respected. Rickey’s faith and Robinson’s character made this integration possible.

Let’s go back to Paul’s teachings in Romans. For Paul, it is important to make the distinction between faith and law, the Torah. It was not obedience to the law (in fact, the law of Moses would not come for another 800 years after Abraham) but *trust*, that is, *faith*, that got Abraham reckoned righteous. Paul wants his contemporaries in Rome to see their salvation is linked with their faith, not with obedience to the Torah. What he’s saying in Romans 4 is, “see, it’s always been faith, and it’s *still* faith, that gets you saved.”

The trusting relationship with God enables God to reach you. It *has* to be faith, he says, because if adhering to the law were the way to go, then “faith is null and the promise is void” (4:14). Faith becomes irrelevant if fastidious adherence to the law is the way to fulfill God’s will. So faith is where it’s at. With faith we follow the law of love written on the heart, not an external law.

And, of course, faith fundamentally means trust. It does not basically mean a set of doctrines one believes. It means *someone* whom one trusts wholeheartedly. Paul is making the case for a faith-based spirituality. Elsewhere he speaks of faith, hope, and love, and says love is the greatest (1 Cor 13:13). Faith is the initiator, but faith is trust, and that means it has love within it from the start. From God’s side, love is the initiator, and we respond with faithful trust. Faith has to be active to be real.

Next we meet Nicodemus, who is honestly seeking a deeper understanding. Jesus tells Nicodemus that one must be born again, born of the Spirit, which means obtain a new and spiritual motive for living. To some degree, you will be surprised as you grow spiritually, because you don’t know where the Spirit will lead you, just as you don’t know which way the wind will be blowing, but you have to trust and allow that uncertainty in your new life. You will not be in charge of the Spirit, but it will be in charge of you. You can’t control the wind, and you can’t control the Spirit.

Alexander Ogorodnikov is a Russian citizen who felt moved, as a graduate student, to make a film about religious life. This was during Soviet times. He was kicked out of the university. Two years later he was confined in a psychiatric hospital. The fact that he still had religious beliefs even after a Soviet education was used as evidence that he had a mental problem. Public opinion in Russia and the West spoke up against this, and he was released, but later was sent to a labor camp, and finally was released by Gorbachev. After the fall of communism, he founded a charitable group and a drug treatment center. As far as I know, he never made his film, but he was interviewed and a book was written about him, which is available in English (*Dissident for Life*). His life went in unexpected directions, but he was always following the Spirit.

Back to our gospel story. Nicodemus is baffled by Jesus’ words, and Jesus gently chides him, although later records indicate that Nicodemus became a believer. He would help to wrap Jesus’ body in linen and spices, and carry it to the tomb (John 19:39–41). We don’t know which aspect of what Jesus said baffles Nicodemus. It may be that he is just portrayed as being clueless, so that Jesus can say more about how the Spirit works.

Nicodemus is Watson and Jesus is Holmes, explaining things to him, accompanied by a Sherlock-like rebuke, saying, in effect “you should be able to figure this out, Watson.” Well, we probably should be able to reason out what “born of the Spirit” means. I think we can figure out that being reborn is a metaphor for starting a new way of living. This new life is based on the Spirit. That seems to imply that our actions, our thoughts, probably even our affections will be guided and directed by the Spirit. Spirit will only lead and guide us; we will never be *forced* to do anything by the Spirit.

So both Paul and Jesus are envisioning a new way of living, a spiritually-motivated or trust-motivated way of living. Rufus Jones tells a story told to him by Dr. Joseph Twitchell, of how Twitchell once went on a camping trip with the theologian Horace Bushnell. In their tent at night, Bushnell prayed “so simply and so naturally, and with such apparent certainty of the near Presence of the Person to whom he was talking,” that Twitchell felt the Presence, too, and whenever he stretched his arms outside of the covers, “it seemed as though he *touched God*” (Jones, *A Preface to Christian Faith in a New Age*, 88). Bushnell created an atmosphere of trust when he prayed!

Maybe we can do the same, not through some kind of mind-control or manipulation, but just through our sincerity. Sincerity carries power and conviction.

Trust in the Spirit. Have faith that the best is yet to come. God loves us and wants only the best for us.