

Second Sunday in Lent
March 12, 2017
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
The Family Tree of God's Grace
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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, children of our father, Abraham:

Last week we looked at our family tree planted in Adam and Eve. The trunk rotted and died as do we, the branches. God planted another family tree right away in the first promise of the Savior who would crush Satan's power. The ground for that tree is God's grace. The trunk is Abram, later called Abraham, which means "the father of many."

The first tree dies because of the rot of sin. The second tree lives on account of faith in God's Word and will never die. Paul's words to the Roman Christians are a commentary on Abram's encounter with God at Haran. There, God promised Abram he would be the father of a great earthly nation. And, that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." When Abram and his family arrived in Canaan, our spiritual father "built an altar to the LORD, and called on the name of the LORD."

The holy Christian church, all believers in Jesus Christ, is **The Family Tree of God's Grace**. Abram is the trunk. The branches are the world's many nations.

Abraham is the father of two nations; the circumcised, Israel and the uncircumcised, all who believe in God and his Word, as Abraham believed. Paul expands that thought in the verses between 5 and 13. Our focus is on the second family tree, the church. "Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness." When the LORD told him to move, that he would be a great nation though childless, that all the peoples on earth would be blessed through him, Abraham believed the LORD.

God imputed the holiness of the coming Savior to Abraham through the faith the Holy Spirit had created in our father's heart. Abraham recognized it was not because of his works that he was justified, declared not guilty. If Abraham in fact could boast of his good works, that boasting could be only to other people and "not before God."

Faith was credited to Abraham not because faith was something he chose to do and could boast about as his own work. Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness because the object of that faith is the Redeemer's perfect life under the law, and sacrificial death on the cross. Abraham's righteousness was Christ's righteousness. Like father, like children. My righteousness is Christ's righteousness.

The apostle made the application of wages. Our wages are not a gift but an obligation. God has no obligation to justify us by our works which are never enough. "However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness."

Abraham is the trunk of the family tree of God's grace. "He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed." Abraham is the father of us all; Jews who believe in Jesus as their Savior, and Gentiles who believe in Jesus as our Savior. Abraham's heirs are not those who live by the law and seek a righteousness of works. Then righteousness would not be by grace through faith which it actually is. The law only brings wrath. The law brings transgression as it shows us our sin before God.

Any boasting before God about works, or faith, or a righteousness of our own is excluded on the principle that we are justified by faith apart from observing the law. That faith is a gift of God by the Spirit's working in our hearts through the good news of Jesus' death and

resurrection. Abraham is the trunk of our family tree not because we have his blood in our veins. It is because we have our father's faith in God and his Word, especially the Word of Christ, in our hearts. The branches are the world's many nations.

The apostle quoted Moses from Genesis 17, "As it is written, I have made you the father of many nations." Notice the prophetic past tense? Paul is speaking about believers in Christ who will come from all the nations of the earth. We along with them believe with Abraham and Paul that God is the One "who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were."

Abraham and Sarah were dead so to speak in their ability to have a child. Yet, the LORD gave them Isaac. God calls sinners who are not his children by birth and nature to be members of his family by giving them the gift of faith with its blessing of the forgiveness of sins. God raises us out of death in our trespasses and sins and unbelief and gives us new life in Christ. God rescues us from eternal separation from him to give us a place of honor next to Jesus at his right hand in eternity. God has given life to us, the dead. He calls us who were not his children, his children. God creates realities and possibilities in our lives out of things we could never see, or even imagine.

Abraham's children come from Asia, Africa, Europe, the Americas and other continents of the earth. They speak many languages, have a variety of customs. They look different. The family tree of God's grace is glorious in its textures. It is not one kind of tree like an oak or maple. It is a tree with branches grafted from many nations. The same God who gave life to the nation Israel through Abraham, a descendant of Shem, Noah's son, is the God who gave life to fallen sinners through the Savior who would come from Abraham's family tree. Abraham is the trunk from which branches sprout not by blood but by a common faith with him.

The apostle Peter describes our family tree in these familiar terms, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God." [1 Peter 2:9]

None of us has received our high calling through obedience to God's law, the Ten Commandments. With our father Abraham we are heirs of the world "through the righteousness that comes by faith." With Abraham we come to our altar and call on the name of the Lord. Because as Paul wrote later in this epistle, chapter 10, "For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile-the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Amen. <SDG>