

Easter Sunday, 2011

Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring - not only those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. As it is written, "I have made you a father of many nations."

Romans 4:16

Introduction

We all need a place to belong.

At the end of World War II, there were more than fifty prisoners of war in Indochina who suffered from amnesia. They couldn't remember who they were and there were no records to identify them.

Someone came up with an idea. They would place photographs of the prisoners in a Parisian newspaper with a notice that they would be appearing at the Paris Opera House on a certain night. The article would plead for anyone who might be able to identify them to come on that night and help these men to know who they are.

Can you imagine what it would be like to be one of the soldiers on that night. The soldiers marched out on stage one by one. And as the spotlight shone upon them they would ask, "Does anyone know who I am?" (From Tony Campolo, "Let Me Tell You a Story", p. 183.)

We all need a sense of purpose and meaning in our lives. We find purpose and meaning by playing a certain role in a community of people. That role is given to us by the relationships we have with other. We all need a place to belong.

On this Easter season we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. With the resurrection comes a message to every human being on this planet. You belong. The gift of relationship with God is offered to everyone. With that relationships comes a place in the community of humanity. With that place comes meaning and purpose.

Jesus has risen! You belong!

A Time Magazine article a few years ago was entitled: "The Legacy of Abraham: Muslims, Christians and Jews all claim him to be their father. A new book explores whether he could be a peacemaker among the three religions."

Judaism, Christianity and Islam consider Abraham to be their father. That means that over 3.8 billion people who are Muslim, Christian and Jewish trace themselves back to a common person.

Now 3.8 billion may not sound like much compared to our nations deficit, but it is 54% of the population of the planet. (30% other religions and 16% non-religious.) That is enough to win a global democratic election!

Our passage ends with the phrase, "As it is written, 'I have made you a father of many nations.'" Paul wrote this before Islam existed and while Christianity was much smaller than it is today. The fulness of the meaning of his passage has only developed over the centuries since it was first written. But today 3.8 billion people belong to Abraham.

This common heritage actually means that Jews, Christians and Muslims share much in common. All agree on a number of things about the character of God. God is one, God is personal, and God created all human beings.. They also agree that God reveals his divine will in written scriptures.

In Genesis 12:1-2 we read:

1 The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. 2 "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing."

The personal God of Abraham expresses his love by calling for relationship with him. He makes a promise to him that if Abraham will leave the life he knows God will protect him, God will make his life meaningful, God will make his life impact the whole world.

And today 3.8 billion people find this relationship, this identity, this sense of belonging in relation to Abraham.

If we get 54% of humanity believing that Abraham is our father, "Why can't we all just get along?" Many see the problem being religious. John Lennon only popularized a long standing view of some of the intellectual elites of Western society when he suggested that the removal of religion would result in peace. But our inability to be unified goes deeper than this.

On March 13, 1991, George Holiday videotaped LAPD officers repeatedly striking Rodney King with their batons while other officers watched. The video went viral and four of the officers were arrested and tried in court. But when they were acquitted the Los Angeles riots of 1992 began. For 6 days there was widespread looting, assault, arson and murder in our city. Fifty-three people died and thousands were injured.

Problems among human beings are not simply religious. There seem to be other reasons why we can't just get along.

We try to enforce unity among ourselves by setting up rules.

This starts at an early age. Remember playing with our childhood friends? We would play until a problem came up over the rules. Then we would develop a new rule everyone agreed on and the play would continue until another disagreement came up.

Calvin and Hobbes, the main characters of a wonderful cartoon strip by Bill Watterson, often play a game called "Calvinball". I looked it up on line and actually found a list of rules for Calvinball:

1.2 Any player may declare a new rule at any point in the game. The player may do this audibly or silently depending on what zone (Refer to Rule 1.5) the player is in.

1.3. A player may use the Calvinball (See Calvinball Equipment - 2.2) in any way the player see fits, whether it be to incur injury upon other players or to gain benefits for himself.

1.4. Any penalty legislation may be in the form of pain, embarrassment, or

any degradation the rulee wishes to execute upon the other player.

This is fun as a children's game. But it gets old as a way of life.

BBC News this morning reports that members of a Protestant church in Beijing are being arrested as they gather to celebrate Easter. Dozens have been arrested because they wanted to have an outdoor worship service.

20 million Chinese Christians worship in churches that have been registered with the government. At least another 50 million worship in unregistered churches. These unregistered churches are normally tolerated by the government. But by planning a service in public, those who show up are herded on to buses and taken to police stations in the area. The pastor is under house arrest.

The rules support a certain group who has power or numbers against another group of people. We are back to the disunity we are trying to get away from.

Calvinball is fun as a children's game. But it gets old as a way of life.

We have tried to get away from "the Calvinball life" in our own culture. We have reduced our social rules down to a few things; preeminent among them is tolerance. But tolerance is still a rule.

We stand against the scarlet letter "A" which Hester Prynne was forced to wear by calling our society to tolerate others. At the same time, we put Scarlet Letters on those we consider intolerant. And so, rather than getting away from exclusion, we have simply changed the rules. We have exchanged the "A" for an "I". And human disunity continues.

We are going to have to get much more radical than this if we are going to overcome the divisions among humanity.

Here is the radical move: We must let go of rules and find our unity in relationship.

Our passage this morning is filled with language of relationship; promise, faith, grace.

"Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring - not only those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all."

Romans 4:16

The promise to Abraham is accessed, not by conformity to some law, but by relationship.

Maybe a better way to speak of faith this morning is "trust".  
Maybe a better way to speak of grace this morning is "gift".

The relationship which God promised to Abraham is engaged in by trust - a trust expressed by receiving a gift from God.

This is something that everyone can be a part of.

"Therefore, the promise comes by trust, so that it may be by gift and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring - not only those who conform to some law but to all of those who have the trust of Abraham...He is the father of us all.

We must let go of rules and find our unity in relationship.

My relationship with Cheryl was developing well in 1988. We had met in Mexico City, dated in Honduras, and now she was visiting family in Texas. I decided it was time to take the next step. I was going to get engaged! So, in the fields of a ranch in Rosanky, Texas, I asked her to get engaged. "You mean married?", she asked. Somehow in my popular education I missed the fact that you asked the woman to marry you and then, when she said yes, became engaged. "Uh, yes, of course, married! That's what I meant to say!" I gave her the engagement ring and she accepted it. A promise, 22 years ago, which still holds.

God is pursuing us as I pursued Cheryl. He shows up in different times in human history, pursuing human beings, longing to be in relationship with us once again.

The promise to Abraham is one of those times. God called Abraham into relationship with him and promised to bless the whole world through him.

This was followed by the relationship God made with Moses and the people of Israel. Through this relationship the 10 commandments were given. This law serves as a mirror for all of humanity- to help us to be honest with ourselves about our brokenness, our broken relationship with God and our broken relationship with each other.

And then the resurrection of Jesus, which we celebrate this morning. In Jesus' death and resurrection a new relationship is offered as a gift to each of us. Christ's death on the cross clears away all of our brokenness. His resurrection establishes an opportunity for a fresh relationship with God and a new basis for relating to each other.

God is not confused about engagement and marriage! God longs for a relationship with you and with me that will last forever.

What is God's gift to us? The offer of belonging and identity for you and for me. The offer of unity for all of humanity.

To many in our culture this idea sounds about as good as an 8 track tape. Are you familiar with this old and short-lived technology? I had an 8-track tape of the Grease sound track in Junior High. You would put the 8-track into the stereo system and the first of four lights would shine. Part way through the sound track the sound would fade out and after a loud click it would come back in again. There were reasons why the 8-track didn't last very long.

But what I am suggesting is not some clunky old technology. The problem with religion is not that we have come up with a better technology. No, the problem with this idea of a new relationship with God in Jesus Christ is more like the rediscovery of plumbing.

Do you know who invented the toilet? Some would say Thomas Crapper in the 1800s. But actually he rediscovered something that was known to the Minoans who flourished from 3000BC to 1500 BC. Listen to what a website on the history of plumbing says about the Minoans.

"...their early plumbers had laid elaborate systems of sewage disposal and drainage that resemble one of today.

The queen's bathroom featured decorated walls covered with monochrome frescos and decorated friezes, and plaster stands which held ewers and washing basins. At the heart was a five-foot long, tapered bathtub. The tub was painted terra cotta, and decorated in a bas relief of a watery motif of reeds.

Not too far away was the world's earliest "flushing" water closet, screened off by gypsum partitions on either side."

You see, we humans forget things. We have forgotten how to find unity. In our love for "Calvinball" we have forgotten that unity does not come by enforcing rules of conformity. Our unity comes from a common relationship with God and each other.

Listen to this report of human unity from 2,000 years ago:

"All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people."  
Acts 2:44-47a

This kind of unity is not just ancient history.

Look at what Paul wrote in verse 23. "The words, 'it was credited to him' were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness (or good relationship) - for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification."

We have been justified (that is, the brokenness between us and God has been healed) and made righteous (that is, put in a good relationship with God) by accepting what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. These words were written for us as well.

And look at what Paul writes in verse 16.

"Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring - not only those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all."

This same unity can be experienced by the human race today.

Application

"He is the father of us all."

Have you ever noticed how some dog owners look like their dogs? Now I am not going to get into some "chicken and egg" argument over whether the dog becomes like the owner or the owner like their dog. The point is, as they are in relationship with each other, they start to look like each other. And humans, in relationship with God, start to look like him as well.

We already "look like" God by virtue of being his creating us. But Paul shifts our connection with Abraham from a genetic connection to a connection based upon promise, trust and gift. It is the way in which we relate to God that makes Abraham our father.

What does the face of one who lives by rules, conformity and submission look like? Dour, serious, weighed down. What does the face of one who lives by promise, trust and gift look like? A gleam in their eyes, a spring of hope in their gait, joy in their hearts.

Through this relationship we begin to look like Abraham. In this way we look even more like God. Instead of looking like rules, conformity and submission, we begin to look like promise, trust and gift.

He is the father of us all.

Conclusion

You belong. That is what we are celebrating this Easter morning. That every human being belongs.

God created you.

God wants to be in relationship with you.

God has paved the way for you to be in this relationship through Jesus Christ,

The gift is extended. All you have to do is to accept it.

You belong.