

Sermon Text for August 23, 2015

by

Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Hebrews 7:23-28, Genesis 14:17-24

“What does the Lord require?”

A few years ago I read a book by AJ Jacobs called the year of living biblically. Great book about a non-practicing Jew who tried to live to the letter the commandments of the Old Testament. He has some great stories, but an insight that he gathered that surprised him was that we often think that if we make up our mind, then we can change our behavior. He said the opposite is true, if we change our behavior then we are able to change our mind. He was dumbfounded by how much the outer affects the inner and that it was easier to act your way into a new way of thinking rather than think your way into a new way of acting.

I hope you are all enjoying Abraham as we follow along in his life. The more we go along the more we see Abraham being set up and established as a pioneer in the faith and an incredible example of one who put all of his trust in God. Abraham is someone we have seen who was able to step out of his comfort zone, someone who knew how to let God be God in his life, and today we see his faith and belief put into action as we look at his decision making and his life-style. Abraham knew what the Lord required of him, and he did it in his life.

As Christians we are called not only to believe in Christ but also to follow Christ in the way he lived his life. Now I don't just mean humility and sacrifice, and putting aside our material goods, but what I am talking about is morality. In seminary you are trained not to moralize, not to be too preachy about morality because we hear that our task is theology, we are to focus upon how God is evidenced in our lives. But today using Abraham we will see that our faith is more than just correct thinking and believing, but it must also be proper action. Today we hear a first-hand account of how God is able to take us in whatever setting we find ourselves, remind us that as Hebrews states that Christ is able to save all those who approach him. So let's approach him and hear God's message.

READ

Will Willimon the former dean of Duke Chapel in North Carolina wrote a book called *calling and character: virtues of the ordained life*. In this book he explains what he feels are some of the virtues that a pastor needs to have if he is going to be a good shepherd. It is a timely book because we are living in an age when even pastors and churches, and good moral people are questioning what is a virtue and what is a vice. It seems that for some reason Scripture no longer seems to serve as a guide as it once did but rather now our life experiences and our own opinion tend to hold more clout than the Word of God. We are living in a time when character and the moral stances of a person, even a pastor, are considered separate from whom that person is and what they do. Pastors are certainly held to a certain, even higher level of conduct in their life, and they should be. There really is no such thing as a private life because all of what they do reflects upon their position in society and eventually their message as well.

Political figures also, to a certain extent were expected to live a reasonably moral lifestyle. Even though that has never really been the case with Kennedy and Clinton to the point that most of us don't expect morality from our presidents. What's that statement, it's the economy stupid. In some church bulletins and I see the name of the pastors and then below it says ministers, the congregation. A church should also be known not primarily for the moral character of the pastor, although that is very important, but primarily for the moral character of its members.

The church is called to be a leader, a guide in society but it is rendered defenseless and without a voice if it is perceived as lacking in moral integrity whether because of its pastor or its members. But if a church and its members are seen as good examples and exemplary moral people, then its possibilities are endless. If the church is called to lead in society then the members must be the ones to set the example.

There is a reason why believers are called saints. It is not because they are dead, but rather because we feel that we are totally claimed by God and we have a redeemer, Jesus Christ who was without sin. The church is called not only to lead society in its moral character but also in the direction that society ought to take. Willimon states that the church may be called at times to provoke division, call names, condemn, accuse, and

yes even to judge. But the church is able and enabled to do this only if it can live within its own standards that it sets.

I have a very good friend from seminary who was one of the most vocal figures in the country against the ordination of homosexuals in the Presbyterian Church. Stacy and I and he and his wife used to go camping together, trips to Washington, Atlantic City, we were very close. This friend and his wife have separated because of his unfaithfulness. Let me ask you what kind of voice does he have to speak out against the sin of homosexuality when he himself was a practicing adulterer? The church, its pastors, and yes especially the members have a very specific role to play in society and that is to help direct the morality. The world is watching and waiting for us to trip, to stumble and then it can point and say: "see, they have no right to tell us what to do." And they will be right.

In our Scripture for today we find Abraham in a very different role than what we have come to expect. He is not the traveling chieftain in charge of a tribe with livestock to keep track of, but rather he is depicted as a conquering warrior. We began when he was called by God to go so he went. He ended up in Egypt and then made his way to Canaan where he settled, while his nephew Lot settled in Sodom. A battle takes place and Sodom, along with Abraham's nephew is overcome and taken in captivity. Abraham rounds up his troops and ends up liberating the king of Sodom and his people, Lot included.

We pick up the scene this morning when the king of Sodom approaches Abraham and encourages him to enjoy the spoils of the battle. After all they were the victors so they were entitled to the loot, the cattle, the women, the land. Abraham was a believer in the Lord most high. He knew that it was normal protocol to divide up the loot with the other conquerors. But instead he states: I will take nothing. I have to admit that Abraham was probably a little strange. It was unheard of not to take any of the loot, but Abraham had a good reason not to take any of it. He states in verse 23 that he would not take not even a thread or a sandal, why? So that one day the king might say: I have made Abraham rich. He knew God's promises, trusted in them, and didn't want to do anything that just might jeopardize the credit going to God Almighty. In the midst of a situation where he is being pressured to do what would be the normal thing to do he decides to

follow what the Lord, and only the Lord required of him. He refuses to follow the tide of society and greed and takes a moral step by refusing the spoils of war.

Melchizedek, who was the head high priest comes and blesses Abraham and Abraham gives him a 10th of what he had. Again he wanted to show that he is completely reliable upon God for all things and that his priorities are to trust in God first and foremost. In our first Scripture we read in Hebrews that Jesus himself is called a priest after the order of Melchizedek. This word literally means king of righteousness. Jesus is called king of righteousness. Listen to how the author of Hebrews describes Christ: holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners. Now is this an example of moral character or what? This is one that we are able to follow and claim as our own Savior and leader.

Now we are the gathering of sinners. Let no one make a mistake about that. Paul asks the question in Romans 6:1, should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound. By no means, how can we who died to sin go on living in it? If we know that there is a part of the way we live which is sinful we should take no comfort that Christ forgives, rather we should get on our knees, confess that sin and as Christ stated to the adulterous woman, go and sin no more. With Christ as our light and Scripture as our guide we are to strive to reflect his glory not just for our own good but so that others would be able to see his glory reflected through us. Society is telling us that certain life styles are ok, even good for us and that we are to have an open mind. Society doesn't have the common good in mind, just the individual. If we are going to be moral then we are not going to fit in. That is a heavy burden to carry. But you know Jesus Christ doesn't take away our burdens, but rather makes them worth bearing.

As we carry our burdens we are called to live as the Lord requires us to live. We are called to live a separate way not only in how we think and our theology and our faith and what we base our lives upon but also a separate way of acting. What people do does reflect upon who they are. There is no getting around that, regardless of what we do for a living. The question that we need to ask when we live our lives is not what does this mean for me but rather what impact will this have on my witness as a disciple of Christ. In Deuteronomy the author states what does the Lord require of you. Fear the Lord, walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart

and all your soul. Let us do what the Lord requires not only today but for the rest of our lives. Amen.