

“EVERY STEP OF THE JOURNEY”

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Genesis 15:1-6

Mark 12:41-44

One day, a woman by the name of Dale, came home after a long day at work, put her glasses down on the kitchen table, and went out onto the patio to feed the family cat. As she walked out the sliding glass door and looked up, she saw that there was a beautiful sunset in the making, so after she filled the cat's dish, she sat down in a lawn chair to rest. She relaxed, and sat transfixed on the beautiful colors in the sky, when all of a sudden the cat ran up, ate the cat food, and then, as cats are wont to do, went over and began to rub affectionately against Dale's legs and ankles. Mindlessly and without taking her eyes off of the sunset, Dale reached down and began to pet and stroke the cat. This went on for several minutes - Dale, enjoying the peace and quiet, the beauty of the sunset, and the companionship of her pet, and the animal, happily receiving her affections.

A couple minutes passed, and Dale heard something behind her. It was her husband Gary, who had just gotten home, and was slowly opening the patio door. He began to talk to her, but it was almost in a whisper. "Honey," he said, "don't make any sudden moves. Don't turn around. Just listen to me and quietly answer this question: Do you trust me?"

Dale said, "Of course, I trust you."

"Okay, then, here's what I want you to do. With no questions asked, very gently, very quietly, just stand up and walk slowly into the house."

Well, poor old Dale didn't have any idea what was going on, but she completely trusted her husband, so she followed his instructions to the letter. She gently stood up and slowly walked into the house and closed the sliding glass door behind her, and she said to Gary, "What in the world was that all about? I was just sitting there enjoying the sunset and petting the cat." To which Gary replied, "Well, I just wanted you to see what you were petting." Dale looked out the sliding glass door and, to her amazement, saw that what she had been petting was not the family cat; it was a skunk! (James W. Moore, *If God Has a Refrigerator, Your Picture is on It*, "Celebrating the Spirit of Christ), p. 127.

Thank goodness she listened to her husband. She could have been in one ugly, stinky mess had she not. But she did, because she trusted him. She did

what he asked, even when she didn't know why he was asking, because she trusted him. She knew that he always wanted what was best for her, and so she trusted him.

In whom do you trust? To whom do you listen? Those are important questions for all of us to consider today, because on this day we are being called to make a serious decision - a decision about our financial giving to Christ through this church for next year. What we give and how we give it all depends a lot on whom we trust and to whom we listen.

Both of the scripture lessons this morning involve people having to make serious decisions - pivotal decisions in their lives. The first lesson - the lesson from the Hebrew scriptures involves Abraham and Sarah. At this point in their lives, Abraham and Sarah are really uncertain about their future. They have been unable to bear a child, and in that day and time, that was not just a huge emotional issue for the two of them as a couple, but it was also an enormous societal issue. If you couldn't produce a male heir, you were in deep trouble.

In despair, Abraham turns to God, and pleads with Him, and God hears his cry, and reassures him that, indeed, he and Sarah will have a son, even as old as they are. They would have an heir, and He tells Abraham to look up into the sky and number the stars - for that, God said, is how many descendants you will have one day.

And despite the fact that they were childless right then, and despite the fact that the road they had taken thus far had been filled with both up's and down's, Abraham chose to listen to God, to trust in Him, for He knew that God would not forsake Him. And God didn't forsake him, for He blessed Abraham and Sarah with the son they had always wanted, just as He promised. And all the days of their lives, God was with them, through all the up's and down's, just as He promised.

When all the evidence was to the contrary, and though their hearts had been broken time and again, when no child had been born to them, yet Abraham and Sarah made the choice to listen to God, to trust in Him, and to follow where He called them to go. It changed their lives forever!

So too did the woman in this morning's Gospel lesson listen to God. She was in a somewhat similar situation to Abraham and Sarah, albeit years and years later. She too was, in the eyes of the world, incomplete. She was a widow, and from all we know from life in that day and time, widows were way down on the social ladder - way down. They were pitied, because they had nothing and no one. Very often, widows had to turn to prostitution to have money to care for themselves and their children. We read over and over again in the scriptures how God calls the people to care for the widows and orphans. Widows were deemed helpless and

hopeless.

So here is this widow, and she comes into the temple, on a day that Jesus happens to be there too. And it comes time for the offering, and Jesus, off to the side, watches what goes on. He watches as those who have been blessed with an abundance of resources, make their way to the front of the temple. He watches them as they look to see if people are watching them making their generous offerings. Oh, how they want to be noticed for the greatness of their generosity!

And then, there's the widow. She knew those coins in her pocket were paltry compared to what the others were giving. She knew too that those coins were all she had. Yet she wanted to do something, she wanted to give too. What would she do? Give one of the coins, and keep the rest for herself? Give nothing, because surely people would understand if she did that.

What she did was listen to the One in whom she put her trust. She listened to God speaking in her heart. She listened to the One sure thing she still had in her life - God. And despite all the reasons why she shouldn't give everything she had, and despite all the reasons she didn't have to, she gave it all, anyway. She followed her heart, she trusted in the God who had never forsaken her, she trusted that even in her sadness and sorrow, He was with her, and would make a way for her all the days ahead. So she walked up and put all she had in the offering.

My friends, everyday you and I make choices - lots of them. And the choices we make are a reflection of who it is we trust and to whom we listen.

Today we're making a big choice, a big decision. We're deciding how much we are going to offer to Christ through this church in the next year. It is a huge decision, especially in these tenuous times. I don't need to tell you, because you live with it everyday, how rocky things are. I went to a financial seminar the other day and I heard a litany of things that were wrong and what a struggle we're in, and how we don't know when it will end.

If you've looked at the insert in the bulletin the past few weeks about our church's financial status, you know that things are rocky here too, just like they are in about every other church that I know. But I want to ask something of you, of me, of all of us. I want to ask us to make our decisions, not on the gloomy and doomy situation and forecast of this world. I want us to make our decisions based upon trust - trust in Almighty God, trust in the One who has been with us every step of our journey, who has never forsaken us, who loved us so much He sent His Son for us and for our salvation, and who always makes a way - always.

Good times will come and will go. Hard times will come and will go. But God's love and God's presence is constant. He will not let us go. He will make a

way.

Do you trust Him enough to give fully and faithfully? Do you trust Him enough to offer Him your best? Do you trust Him enough to go out on a limb, and give fully from your heart? Do you trust Him enough? That's what it is all about today - trust.

Don't let fear or timidity make the decision for you. We do that way too often. Bishop Robert Schnase tells the story of a stewardship season in the church he was serving. One day, just before Pledge Sunday, a couple by the name of Terri and Charles visited him in his office. In his sermon the previous Sunday, Rev. Schnase had said that giving was not merely about the church's need for money, but about the Christian's need to give. Well, after hearing that sermon, Terri and Charles had a long talk with each other. They realized that they were both unhappy about the way they were living, so they came to talk to their pastor.

They told him that they couldn't breathe, they were living a lie. They had a big, beautiful house, two cars, a boat - and everyone thought they were so happy. But underneath they were stressed out, arguing all the time about money, in debt over their heads. They felt miserable. In their words, they told him, "they were strangling."

They both had high-income, professional careers and both earned plenty. "But," Terri said, "we lived in constant fear. We were afraid of what others would think if we downsized our house or traded in our cars or stopped doing the things everyone else was doing. We were afraid of the bills, the debts, the banks. We were scared of what would happen if one of us became sick. We were afraid of the shame of bankruptcy. We were afraid our teenagers would find out how precarious our situation was. And we didn't talk about it for fear our marriage couldn't withstand the stress."

And then, after the sermon the week before, they had finally sat down and said to each other, "What kind of life does God really want us to have? Not this kind!" (Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Living*, "The Grace of Giving, p. 115).

Indeed, that is not the kind of life God wants for any of us - a life ruled by fear, a life being afraid that we never have enough, a life being too cautious, a life clutching on tightly to our stuff. God wants us to trust that in Him we will always have enough, He will always be there, and we can step out in faith and give with generosity and joy.

In a few moments, you'll have the opportunity to bring your pledge card up and lay it in front of the altar. May this be a joyful moment for you, as you give

back to God of the gifts He's given so abundantly to you.

May it be a moment of trust for you - trust that in God, for you, and for our church, all will be well.

May it be a moment of understanding that you are joining with Him in doing great things - changing lives, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, setting those who are imprisoned in so many ways free.

May it be a moment, most of all, when you say in a very real way, "Oh God, it is you to whom I am listening this day. It is you in whom I trust."

May it be so.

Amen.