

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Reflection for the Interfaith Community Service of Prayer and Thanksgiving
November 24, 2011 in the Old Broad Street Church
Scripture Readings: Genesis 17:1-9, Matthew 13:31-33, and Luke 16:10-13

AS THE PROMISE GROWS

Abraham and Sarah are a model couple for us, not because they are perfect (they're not) or always respond faithfully to God (they don't), but because they show us what it means to hear God's call, start out on the journey in obedient trust, and struggle to hold on to God's promise as they walk their unmapped path through the distractions and discouragements, the temptations and doubts life puts in their way and sometimes they put in their own way. For me, they make good models because they are not perfect in their faith or their choices. If Abraham and Sarah always chose faithfully and lived up to their calling, their story would offer me more judgment than encouragement. As I look back over 65 years of life and 39 of ordained ministry, I don't care to measure myself against a perfect record. What matters is that God is faithful and that as Abraham and Sarah go forward with God's promise, it grows as they grow. The choices they make in trust and hope and the forgiveness they receive when they falter enable them to learn more and more of the mind of God and see God's purpose expand before them with greater and greater promise.

In our reading from Genesis, God changes Abram's name to Abraham and will change Sarai's name to Sarah as well. The promise grows. The man to be the "father of a nation," though he and his wife have never been able to have children, is now to be the "father of a multitude of nations." In ancient Israel, in biblical thought, naming someone was very important because the name conferred identity and destiny, and when God does the naming, both identity and destiny are brought into the context of the covenant relationship and so of God's faithful love and God's redemptive purpose in this world. Abram will not be the man he makes of himself or remain the person he is presently to himself; Abram is *who he is* to God and will become the person he is already in the mind of God. So the promise grows as God calls Abraham and Sarah forward to become the people they are to be.

But the promise is not for their sake – alone, by themselves. That's the worst thing we do to our thankfulness: we make it a restricted matter of "me and mine." Our life, our prosperity, our blessings, our security, our family, our neighborhood, our prospects for the future. Me, my children and grandchildren, my kind of people, my race or social class, my religious group, people who think as I do, English only. And so we try to constrict the

promise of life God wants to grow and expand. We set the table of thanksgiving for an exclusive few while God wants it spread around the earth.

When Abraham and Sarah set out on the journey God calls them to undertake, they don't know where they are going. They have no prospects but only a promise. God gives them no proof but calls them to entrust themselves and their future to God's faithfulness.

In our modern cleverness empowered by computer algorithms and organizational metrics, we are giving ourselves and our society more and more to what we label "outcome based thinking." It's management thinking but pumped up on steroids, and it's turning into a monster. God does not put the outcomes into our hands. Life does not put the outcomes into our hands, either, and when we think we can manage the outcomes, life makes fools of us. When those who presume they can manage the outcomes are powerful and influential, their folly hurts a lot of people. That's what we're living through these days, as we watch our older generations lose what they thought they had secured and our younger generations lose the future we thought they were promised.

Now, let's be realistic and practical. A certain amount of outcome based thinking is routine for all of us, and without it we would live in constant confusion. Do you make lists of what you hope to accomplish during the day? They help, don't they? You get more done with a list, and you gain the satisfaction of checking things off as you do them – as long as you don't make your list so long a whole team of you couldn't get through it. And, sure, before I get into the car and start driving, I decide where I want to go. I set a destination and map my route, at least in my mind. I don't just start driving in no particular direction toward no particular place. Who teaches with no curriculum? We make plans all the time, and to make a plan we need some sense of what we want the outcome to be. So, what's the problem, and when does it become a big deal?

Some years ago, an arrogant and annoying little saying became popular: "To make an omelet, you have to break a lot of eggs." The meaning was quite plain. To achieve some greater good, some more competitive benefit, those in charge must hurt people and perhaps ruin lives along the way. Small injustices must be overlooked in the pursuit of big goals. Anyone who sees things differently must be discredited and humiliated, no matter how unfairly, so the program can be pushed forward. The outcome matters more than the people who get in the way. There is a name for what happens when outcome based thinking crosses that line and starts sacrificing people and relationships to its goals. The name is "evil." That's what evil is: the sacrificing of people, relationships, social justice, and the integrity of the earth itself to some grand scheme, some idolatrous outcome. And in time, it does not matter whether the great outcome is purely selfish and forged by greed or is benevolent and forged by good intentions. Either way it becomes an idol, and life gets sacrificed to it.

“The person who is trustworthy in very small matters is also trustworthy in great ones; and the person who is dishonest in very small matters is also dishonest in great ones.”

God has not put the outcomes of life into our hands, and we cannot manage them. What God gives us each day, in many small situations, is choices to be faithful and trust God for the outcome. It is the child who matters – not the church, not the football program, not the test scores, and not the balancing of the budget, either. The child. God judges a society, not by its average income inflated by the extreme wealth of a few, but by its treatment of the most vulnerable people in it, represented biblically by the foreign worker living in the community, the widow, the orphan, and the renter who owns no real property.

What a difference it makes if we base our choices, not upon some idolized outcome, but upon the promises of God which we cannot achieve by our own efforts! When we entrust the outcomes to God’s love and faithfulness, we become free to make faithful and compassionate choices in the matters that really do require our decisions. God gives us the ways and means, not the outcomes. If I tell myself to go ahead and disregard people because “the end justifies the means,” I am preaching to myself the gospel of idolatry and evil. We don’t have the power to determine life’s outcomes. We can’t even say for sure what will happen tomorrow. God does give us the power to make choices that are faithful, trusting God for the outcomes, which may be very, very long in coming and truly are never finished.

I was pastor to a woman who gave her life to teaching. During the school year, she taught math and Latin, and she liked best working with the tough boys in that small coal town. In the summer, she taught Native American children on a reservation. She had one big regret: one boy in particular she believed she had failed despite her attempts to reach him. Now even in retirement, she always attended commencement until the year she just was not strong enough and mobile enough to go and had to listen to it on the radio. The commencement speaker was the man who had been that boy Winifred believed she had failed as his teacher. There he stood with his doctorate telling the seniors why he had not given up on himself even though most people had given up on him, and he named a small number of teachers who had, by their caring, forced him to go forward and not quit, and at the top of his short list was Winifred Jones. The outcomes are not in our hands but in God’s, and God’s outcomes will be better than anything we could plan or manage.

I need to stop and wish all of you a truly thankful Thanksgiving, shared in celebration of God’s goodness. The promise will keep growing, and truly it can grow for us when it grows through us for others, especially those tempted to give up on themselves, on life, and on God. Thank you for coming. Happy Thanksgiving, and peace to all of you. Amen.