

## “Good Gifts”

A sermon by the Rev. Frances Savill  
Sunday February 28, 2021/Second Sunday in Lent

Romans 4

Most of you will Remember that I am in a book study with about 20 people from the congregation.

The book is entitled: Free of Charge.

It’s not a particularly easy read, but I think it’s an important one. In the first chapter the author (Miroslav Volf) talks about two common idols.

The first is god as Negotiator. The second is god as Santa Claus. These idols resemble the God of the Bible, but are idols- not God the Father of Jesus.

The Negotiator god gives and blesses when we do what the Negotiator god wants. We keep the commandments, do good works, and then the Negotiator god will bless us and save us.

This wrong thinking about God is part of what Paul is addressing in the Chapter 4 of Romans. Paul is very clear that all that is done for Abraham, and for all of us is a pure gift from God, nothing we earned, or in some way merited by any of us.

The other common idol is god as Santa Claus. This gift giving-god gives without asking anything in return, only smiling blissful affirmations of us. But that is a false understanding of God also. An early expression of the covenant God made with his people was simply: “I shall be your God and you shall be my people.” Abraham was blessed and continued to be blessed so that he would be a blessing to many nations. Jesus said; “if you love me keep my commandments.”

To the disciples, he said; “come follow me.”

Being God’s people, following Jesus, being his disciple obliges us to live and respond to God in faith, in gratitude and as co-workers in the gospel.

God, the Father of Jesus our Lord, doesn’t give to us just so we can be self-indulged, self-centered, takers. But we become people who the infinite God can dwell in and work through for the well-being of the whole creation.

God, the God of the Bible, the God who Jesus called Father, is neither the great Negotiator-god nor the Santa Claus- god.

Let’s turn back to Romans 4 for a few moments and hear Paul’s teaching to the people:

*4<sup>1-3</sup> So how do we fit what we know of Abraham, our first father in the faith, into this new way of looking at things? If Abraham, by what he did for God, got God to approve him, he could certainly have taken credit for it. But the story we’re given is a God-story, not an Abraham-story. What we read in Scripture is, “Abraham entered into what God was doing for him, and that was the turning point. He trusted God to set him right instead of trying to be right on his own.”*

*4-5 If you’re a hard worker and do a good job, you deserve your pay; we don’t call your wages a gift. But if you see that the job is too big for you, that it’s something only God can do, and you trust him to do it—you could never do it for yourself no matter how hard and long you worked—well, that trusting-him-to-do-it is what gets you set right with God, by God. Sheer gift.*

That is our story too.

We could never be put right with God in our strength, or our own righteousness, it was a sheer gift from God.

*“But it’s not just Abraham; it’s also us! The same thing gets said about us when we embrace and believe the One who brought Jesus to life when the conditions were equally hopeless. The sacrificed Jesus made us fit for God, set us right with God.” (Romans 4:25)*

Abraham was set right with God, we are set right with God, for a purpose.

The author of Free of Charge, I think does a really good job of helping us to think about what our new standing in Jesus means for our lives.

The first is ***faith***.

Faith is our open handed receiving of God’s gifts.

The second is ***gratitude***.

When we with open hands and open hearts receive God’s blessings daily; life, health, each breath, our new standing in Jesus, salvation, when we receive these gifts rightly we are filled with gratitude.

The third is what Volf describes as ***“Availability.”***

God gives and blesses us so that we can bless others.

God gives to us so we might give to others.

God’s plans for God’s gift are that the whole creation might flourish, and we get to be part of it.

Speaking again about Abraham, Paul, in the passage from Romans says:

*Abraham dared to trust God to do what only God could do: raise the dead to life, with a word make something out of nothing. When everything was hopeless, Abraham believed anyway, deciding to **live** not on the basis of what he saw he couldn’t do but on what God said he would do. And so he was made father of a multitude of peoples.*

Abraham's faith caused him to throw himself wholeheartedly into God and God's promises, and live responsive and available to God, and it led him on an adventure of a life time.

I entitled this message: A mission from God. And for just a moment I want you to consider where God's mission will take you this week. "Every word, every gesture, even the simple act of paying attention can be a gift and therefore an echo of God's life in us." (Free of Charge p.53)

When we live responsive to God, allowing God's love to flow through us to others the barrier between the sacred and mundane are broken, and the mundane is flooded with the sacred.

A friend was considering part of her mission this week as "porch drops"- dropping off surprise cards or goodies to brighten someone's day. Our extra-exciting encouragers pray and show expressions of care daily, allowing God to bless another member of the congregation.

Are you stuck at home, you can still pray, you can still use the phone, be a source of wisdom, be a listening ear, be kind to the people who you see, and allow God to work through you. Every word, every gesture, even the simple act of paying attention can be a gift and therefore an echo of God's life in us.

But I expect that God will lead you to some surprising moments, and your mission from God will take some interesting turns.

Thanks be to God.