

“For I Know Whom I Believe”
Gen. 17:1-7, 15-16, Rom. 4:13-25
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On my first reading of today’s text from Romans, I immediately zoned in on this phrase, Abraham “knew in whom he believed.” It reminded me of an old gospel hymn sung in my childhood, which began with a smooth melody:

I know not why God’s wondrous love to me he hath made known and I unworthy Christ in love redeemed me as his own.

And then with acclamation the refrain sang forth:

But I know whom I have believed in and am persuaded that he is able, to keep that which I’ve committed unto him until that day.

That hymn still moves me emotionally today, even though the way I describe God’s wondrous love is with different words.

Abraham knew in whom he believed and trusted in God’s ability to keep the promise made to him. In the book of Romans, Paul’s task is to teach the early Christians that the promise of saving love was not based on Jewish law but on a relationship of knowing and being known. And because it was not based on Jewish lineage and law it was a gift to Gentiles as well as Jews. The promise transcended in groups and out groups. Was this Jewish reformer, Jesus, and his great spokesperson Paul, who was also a devout Jew, open to a multicultural, multiracial church? Was Paul saying Christianity was to embrace foreigners? Yes! Would foreigners have to be circumcised and like Jews before being able to become Christians? Paul says “no.”

Abraham was called by God before any law of Moses even existed. He was found by God and found God through a relationship of covenant and commitment. Much of the Bible describes God’s people as teetering between being people of the law or people of covenant. Most of the time when the Jews were in trouble, it was because they were paying more attention to the law than to their relationship with the Giver of the law.

Last weekend at Confirmation Camp I invited the youth to write questions on index cards (anonymously) for the clergy who were there to answer. It was our little reality show. One of the questions evolved into a discussion of why the UCC doesn’t have many mega churches. We do have Trinity UCC in Chicago with over 5,000 members where Barrack Obama attends. And we have another mega church in Atlanta, Georgia with over several thousands members.

And we just recently received a church in Dallas, Texas with several thousand members. They joined us because they resonated with actions taken at our last General Synod. But we don’t have many mega churches. One reason is because the UCC refuses to do your thinking for you.

Freedom of conscience and of religious thought and expression is deeply rooted in the marrow of the history of the UCC. Sometimes people just want to be told what to believe and to do. But I can't tell you what to believe, and I don't think you'd like it if I tried.

But what we can do for each other is to remind us whose we are and call each other to cherish our relationships with God and honor the God in one another even if it may not be the same as we recognize within ourselves. Mega churches often emphasize taking Jesus as one's personal Lord and Savior. This may be fine, but our denomination demands an extension of that love and a commitment that translates beyond that phrase and into our daily living.

When I promise to take Tom as my husband and love and cherish him the rest of my life; he expects that to translate into further action. It's hard work to be in relationship. It requires an openness to the other; not that we melt away and become what the other wants us to become; but we are open to being changed by the power of relationship.

And when we talk of covenantal relationship within church circles we're talking about a community's relationship as well as an individual's one. The identity of the church is captured beautifully in the poetry of Father Hans Kung:

*To be a Church that knows what it does not know,
To be a Church that relies upon God's grace and wisdom and has in its weakness and
ignorance a radical confidence in God,
To be a Church that is strong in faith, joyous and certain, yet self-critical,
To be a Church filled with intellectual desire, spontaneity, animation, and fruitfulness,
To be a Church that has the courage of initiative and the courage to take risks,
To be a Church that is altogether open to the real world, to be a thoroughly truthful
Church!
This is the cost and joy of discipleship, the continuing reformation, the Church of Jesus
Christ, the power of God!*

The church is about risky business. We're on the front-line. I took this handbag that I was given by Bee Dallas from the rummage sale to show the kids at Confirmation Camp. This bag is made out of recycled plastic bags. I told the kids that one very important theme of the UCC was the protection and care of creation. At the 1989 Synod in Vancouver, CA, this priority was named as "The Integrity of Creation." This was fairly early in the environmental movement. I have a list of proclamations put forth by the UCC over its existence that I share with clergy learning the history and polity of the church.

When I reviewed this list in one of my classes, one of the students started crying. She said, "I had no idea my church was so ahead of the times." We are called to be a church that has "the courage of initiative and the courage to take risks." By the way, this doesn't mean we all have to agree with all the proclamations made by the United Church of Christ, but we don't stifle the discussion. As our constitution says, "we hold each other in high esteem."

Alfred North Whitehead describes God as an adventurer. So if we are trying to be faithful, we, too, join in the adventure. One of the pivotal stages in faith development is when we give up on

knowing all the answers and give *our all* to knowing the One who holds the answers. A great thing about having adult children is no longer feeling obliged to teach them the rules of behavior. With adult children, it's all about sharing in relationships. God wants us to become adult children.

Rules are variable and subject to interpretation. Rules may belong to ancient Jewish codes but not to Greek Gentiles wanting to become Christians. Correct answers to the many questions life poses may be difficult to always ascertain. At least, I hope I'm not the only one that doesn't always know the right thing to do in all circumstances. But when I get stuck, I can ask the BIG question, "What does my relationships with God call me to do?" Paul says that it is grace that saves us. I was way too old before I learned the meaning of grace. Sometimes even now I revert to the "beat myself up because I'm not good enough" state of mind. But God calls us to live in a grace-filled relationship. To love and be loved. To dwell in knowing and being known.

Our gospel text in Mark, comes right after Peter's great confession: "You, Jesus, are the Messiah." But Peter only *thought* he knew Jesus as the Messiah. You see, Messiahs don't die and when Jesus foretells his death, Peter kind of calls him aside and says, "No, Jesus, that's not in the script." Peter was paying attention to the way things were suppose to be rather than a relationship with the One, this Jesus, standing before him. He learns a bitter lesson, but one that reorients his life so that he is forever changed. He discovers the living Christ, and the rests is history.

The amazing thing to me about our ancestor Abraham is his willingness to "let go and let God." He did not know how someone of his advanced age married to a barren woman would have a lasting legacy. He didn't know what land or where this God was sending him. He knew very little about his future. But he did know in whom he believed. The words of today's anthem *Credo* are from an inscription found in a Cologne cellar where Jews hid during W.W.II: "I believe in the sun even when I cannot see it. I believe in love even when I do not feel it. I believe in God even when God is silent." What an example of faith as today we face our futures, both as individuals and as a church. May God bless us in our knowing and being known from this day forth and forever. Amen