

**August 17 2014**

**Scripture Lessons**

*Isaiah 56:1, 6-8*

*Romans 8:31-39*

**Sermon**            *The Cutting Edge of Faith*

Well, the story is told of the young man, and this has to do with the committee which I serve on in the conference. A young man was being examined for his ordination by the conference committee on the church and on ministry. If you have ever been involved in these things, people like to hear the sound of their own voice so the examination became long, and became arduous, and it became needlessly demanding, and after more than an hour of questioning one elderly minister in the back of the room arose and put before the candidate what those in theology would call the classic Calvinist question, which is related to one of the statements about Jesus which we can find in Apostles Creed “Young man,” said that elderly minister, “would you be willing to go to hell for the glory of God?” The weary candidate thought for a moment and he answered in a firm voice, “Sir, not only would I be willing for the glory of God. I would be willing for this whole committee to go to hell as well.” Sometimes feel like that when you are serving on one of these committees.

This is something of what I had in mind when I gave the sermon the title “The Cutting Edge of Faith.” For by those words I refer to those nitty gritty times when our faith is being put to the test; when our beliefs and values are right in the line; when it feels like we have literally gone to hell and back for the sake of our faith; when the stakes are high can we really trust God to take care of us in this troubled world in which we live. When that question confronts us we are living on the edge; we are living on the cutting edge of faith. Now reading from Romans this morning, Paul had some insights to help us survive what I call cutting edge.

But first of all, let us look at one concrete example from scripture about the things that I am talking about. Extreme examples to be sure, imagine the Old Testament patriarch Abraham as he held that knife before the breast of his son Isaac. Put yourself in his mind. How did Abraham feel as he prepared to sacrifice his own son? What went through Abraham's mind as he got ready to point that knife in his very son that God had promised to him and Sarah? Now, of course, in introspect we know that God did not allow Abraham to kill little Isaac in that incident. We know, according to the story, Abraham was somehow being tested. Still that sick feeling in the stomach keeps us on the edge about the whole thing remaining as we wonder why in the world that God would do something so horrible to that old man Abraham. Surely the God who searches all of our hearts already knew the caliber of Abraham's faith. So why would God test him in this way? Maybe we should step back and look at this a little bit differently from a different angle. Maybe we could understand the test is not for God's sake but for the sake of Abraham. We all know that Abraham would have to have a strong faith to live up to the covenant that he had made with God. In this story maybe God is working to build that kind of faith in Abraham. When he allows his children to be tested God does so not in the hope that we are going to fall and fail, but in the hope that we will come safely through whatever trial comes along our way, in the hope we will pass through that trial, and there by grow in faith and trust for God.

A Chinese proverb that sort of describes this kind of situation, "the gem is not polished without a sense of friction; nor the person perfected without some trial in life" It is a hard point of view for me to accept sometimes, but how would I ever grow in my faith if I were never stretched; if I were never tested along the way? Stepping back and thinking about our general everyday adversity in these terms there is really no reason for us to be afraid when we find ourselves in the midst of the storms of life. As God's beloved children we can approach every trial with faith believing that God will provide the means to somehow to see us through. As Abraham led Isaac up to the altar of sacrifice to calm his son's fears Abraham sort of half heartily mumbled these words, "God will provide the sacrifice." But little did he imagine how true

those words to be. At the very last moment, of course, we know that God stopped the knife and Abraham looked up saw the ram entangled in the bushes ready to be sacrificed in Isaac's place. Now maybe that ram was there in the bushes all along and maybe Abraham was so wrapped up in his fears and paralyzed by them as we are sometimes in difficult situations that he failed to see what God had provided for him in that situation. I really don't know. Whatever the case, Abraham leaves that mountain knowing the Lord will provide in the honor of the event. Think about those words, "The Lord will provide."

Many centuries later Paul still proclaimed that message when Christians were being persecuted for their faith. The persecution was not yet peaked, but already Paul could speak about some of the things that he speaks about the passage from Romans; peril, nakedness, and sword. We can well imagine how afraid the Roman Christians were. How did they know God would keep them through the coming hard times that they were about to face? Paul's answer to that question is one of the classic passages of the New Testament and one of my favorites that I often use at funerals services. He begins by saying, "You listen here if God gave us his only Son you really think that God would withhold anything else that we might need in the course of life. God has already given us his best. Why would God hold back anything else from any of us? Then Paul goes on to speak about the great love that God has for each one of us; a love that can never be taken away from us, no matter what happens to us in life. We would do very well to remember that love when it seems we are going through a period of trials in our lives as well. As in the case of Abraham here is where the wrestling comes in. Some of us may believe some tests come directly from the hand of God for a specific purpose, but surely, as in the case of persecution of the Christians, and other dire situations, God does not have a direct hand in most times of testing. I don't know, but whatever God's role is it is clear that God is able to use even the most terrible events in this life as a means to deepen and strengthen our faith in God. There comes a time when God demonstrates again and again how much God loves us; how much God wants the best for us in this life. Sometimes, and I don't have to tell you we are confronted by some

pretty terrible things in life; sometimes by the loss of our job; the death of a child; crippling or depilating disease; a traffic accident; times when we don't know where to go or to whom we should turn. I don't believe personally that our loving God causes these things to us, but I believe this, that with all my heart that God can and does work through the most unbearable tragedy to help us emerge stronger and more dedicated people of faith in the wake of that difficulty. In the nature of our fallen world when these tests and trials to come our way, in the course of life we can't do anything about that. However, no matter what comes to us there is no sorrow so profound; there is no loss so shattering; there is no threat so terrifying that God's love can't see us through. With each trial we survive we become stronger to face that next hardship and better equip to serve God. We understand this, and we can repeat all words in our heart in all these things, we are more conquerors through the one that loved us. So I encourage you to take some time to mediate and even wrestle with Paul's words as you encounter the difficult times during the course of the week; as you encounter the good times during the course of the week, as you engage in your prayers with God this week. And together we say AMEN.