

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

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February 17, 2008

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

The Promise of Faith

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

Malcolm Forbes died in 1990. In his will he forgave up to ten thousand dollars of each employee's debt to the Forbes Company. Of course, those who weren't in debt to the company didn't benefit. But, imagine how the employees who had borrowed money must have felt! Must've been quite a party spirit at Forbes, Inc., when they found out! In addition, the will stipulated that every employee should receive an extra week's pay that year. Quite a generous gift, agreed? Why did he do that? Not because they earned it — there weren't any qualifiers on the gift. Not because of anything they'd done — didn't matter whether they were outstanding or inept. And not because they loved him or were faithful to him, either. Malcolm Forbes did what he did probably just because he wanted to. Makes you wish you'd been one of his employees, doesn't it? All because Forbes' was generous in his will.

Well, we've been put right with God, you and I. That means our debt to God has been cancelled. And not just a portion of our indebtedness, either — the whole thing. Unlike Malcolm Forbes who only forgave up to ten thousand dollars, God has cancelled our whole indebtedness! Naturally those who weren't indebted to God didn't benefit. But, then who among us wasn't indebted to God? Large debt or small, God cancelled it. Why? Not because we earned it — there aren't any qualifiers on God's generosity. Not because of anything we've done — doesn't matter whether we've been outstanding or inept. And not because we love God, or are faithful to God. God forgave our indebtedness because God wanted to. And why not? Surely God is as generous as Malcolm Forbes. Makes you glad to be one of God's people, doesn't it? God is far more generous than Malcolm Forbes.

You'd think we'd be out celebrating and whooping it up. You'd think we'd be throwing a grand party. You'd think we'd invite all our friends, and serve them hors d'oeuvres and wine, well maybe not wine, not here, anyway. But we seem to be rather reserved about our faith. Some of us are more concerned about decorum and proper behavior, that sort of thing. I hear that if a child wants a couple of cookies at the fellowship time, we might just pull the plate away. Really? If someone says "Amen!" or "Praise the Lord!" people get a bit nervous and look to see who did that. We've heard even better news than Forbes' employees. You'd think we'd be overflowing with joy. We ought to feel at least as good as the Forbes' employees felt that year.

Maybe we don't realize how much we have to celebrate. Like Forbes employees who hadn't borrowed from the company, people who don't see themselves as sinners might begrudge the old man's generosity. Why, if we'd known God was going to be so generous, we'd have run up the tab a little, you can bet on that! William Shakespeare put it this way: "Nothing emboldens sin so much as mercy." (Timon of Athens III, v, 3) Or maybe we don't really believe our sins are forgiven. The whole forgiveness thing seems too good to be true. Down deep we may have carried those not OK feelings for quite awhile. Besides, we're uncomfortable getting something for nothing. "What's the catch?" we want to know.

Listen! Lots of people do what's right in this world — lots of people respect their parents, don't kill or commit adultery. They don't steal or covet or accuse people falsely. Many people obey

God's law. But why? Because it's the right thing to do? Because that's what their parents taught them? Because someone they know has been discriminated against and they're out to change the system? Lots of people are good people. But they aren't overly joyful. Sometimes they're downright miserable. Crusaders are usually critical of those who don't join their crusade. When their cause makes progress it's because of their efforts. And when they don't make progress, it's someone else's fault. We all know people like that, good people, but joyless. We've met them. Maybe we are them.

Well what do we expect, anyway? What do we think will happen as a result of our goodness? If we take credit for what happens, we have our reward. It's as if we were paid for being good. And having been paid, we might even grumble about the paycheck. Why? Because when we think that way, nobody else is as good as we. Nobody else is as committed, nobody else gives as much money, nobody else works as hard as we. Of course if everybody in the world would just agree with us . . . What do we expect anyway? If everything in this world depends on us . . . well that's a pretty tough row to hoe.

By contrast, look at Abraham and Sarah. Paul says they believed God and were counted righteous. But it wasn't their faith that won God's approval. Nor was it their obedience. They heard God promise to give them a future and they set out trusting God to deliver the goods — no questions asked. That's why they're called righteous. Not because they did what they were told. And not because they believed in order to receive God's favor. They heard God say, "This is your future: land, descendants, and blessing." And they took God at his word. When God willed Abraham and Sarah the future, it wasn't because they'd done anything to earn it — they hadn't. It wasn't because they believed in God. Nor was it because they loved God, or were faithful to God. God willed Abraham and Sarah the future because God wanted to: and they believed him. That's why they're called righteous.

Don't you see? People often talk of faith as if it were something we do in order to be saved. But if that were true, we'd have something to boast about. People act as if being good or doing good deeds was all that mattered. If that were true we could compare ourselves to others and feel superior. No! This is what matters. The future belongs to Christ. That's the promise of faith. Our future is to be more Christ-like. Not by striving to be better, but by allowing God to make us new. And God has promised to do just that — the God who brings the dead to life and whose command brings into being what did not exist.

You see, faith is action that trusts God without certainty of success. It's obedience without regard for reward. Faith is believing God and acting on the expectation that God will keep God's promises. Faith expects God, "to form a new community wrought only by miracle and reliant only on God's faithfulness." We receive people into that new community by baptism and by reaffirmation of faith believing not only that they are being made new, but also their presence is making us new. Trusting God's promise, faith is the capacity to embrace the "announced future with such passion that the present can be relinquished for the sake of that future." Faithful people let go of today in anticipation of tomorrow. Faithful people are pilgrimage people, letting go of the past, living into the promise of faith.