

19TH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – C (August 8, 2010)
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Of all the religions in the world, only three are monotheistic--based on the belief that there is only one true God. Those three religions are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Our understandings of that one true God are certainly different, but we do share a belief in the oneness of God. Another common element among those three great faiths is the role played by Abraham who is considered by all three as the father of faith. We know about Abraham from the Old Testament book of Genesis, and our second reading today (from the New Testament letter to the Hebrews) summarizes well why he is such a pivotal figure in salvation history. In fact, throughout Scripture Abraham is praised and held up as a model and example of faith. The author of Hebrews first gives us a good description of faith as “the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen.”

The author then goes on to recall some of the examples of how Abraham was indeed a man of faith, and how strong that faith must have been. First, Abraham obeyed God’s call to uproot himself and his family from his homeland and go to a place he had never been before and knew nothing about. Think how you might respond if God spoke directly to you and told you he wanted you and your family to move to central Africa or Siberian Russia. Would you be willing to leave your job, your friends, your homeland, your own comfort zone in such a radical way? Next, we are reminded how Abraham believed God’s promise that he and his wife Sarah would have a son. Now, that may not seem like such an extreme situation...until you remember that Abraham was 100 years old at the time and his wife Sarah was 90. Hardly the normal child-bearing situation, to say the least... In fact, the book of Genesis tells us that both Abraham and Sarah laughed when they heard God’s promise. Well, God indeed had the last laugh, because Sarah indeed conceived and bore a son—Isaac, a name coming from the Hebrew word for laughter! Finally, the author of Hebrews recalls how Abraham, in response to God’s call, was willing in faith to offer up his son Isaac as a sacrifice—even though that would seem to nullify God’s earlier promise that Abraham’s descendants through Isaac would be as many as the stars in the sky.

It is no wonder that Abraham is held up to us as a wonderful example of faith and obedience in response to the call of God. Now, it is certainly true that not everyone is directly challenged by God to respond in faith to such seemingly impossible things as Abraham was—and I daresay we can be grateful for that. But we certainly are called to follow his example of faith to the extent that God calls us. Abraham is also a wonderful example of faith in action—faith as something much more than simply a mental or spiritual frame of mind. He not only heard and trusted God’s words—he took steps to put them into practice. He acted: he moved himself and his relatives to an unknown land; he and Sarah actually conceived and had a son; he was truly going to sacrifice his son until an angel stepped in at the last minute. He stepped forward, he acted in faith...even though he didn’t have all the answers, even if he didn’t know how God’s promises could possibly be fulfilled, even though it meant having to give up control of his own situation. In the gospels, Jesus called for that same kind of radical, trusting, faithful response to his call to discipleship. In today’s gospel, for example, he challenged his disciples to sell their belongings and give alms; elsewhere Jesus would simply say: “Follow me”...and he did so without providing much if any detailed directions whatsoever.

So we are certainly called to have faith, to trust in God. That does not mean, of course, that we forget about things like prudence and wisdom and using our common sense. What do you suppose would happen if I were to claim that I have faith that I could jump off the rectory roof, flap my arms and fly wherever I want...and then I proceed to jump off the roof? I have a hunch that the law of gravity just might prevail after all! Or to consider a slightly less absurd example: let’s say that in my younger years in grade school and high school I would have said that I have faith that I could grow up to be a great baseball star. I’m sure that my gym teachers would have told me that since athletic coordination was not really one of my more obvious gifts, I may want to think about something else. The point is: yes, we are

certainly called to live and act on a life of faith in God and trust in his guidance and providence, but that does not mean that we check in our brains at the door. Nor does it mean that we have to proceed using only our own resources. Prayer is of central importance in directing us in the path to which God is calling us—asking the Holy Spirit to help us know what God wants of us and where he wants us to go. Along with prayer, we certainly want to seek direction from other sources: reading and praying with Sacred Scripture, consulting the teachings of our faith and Church especially if we are struggling with a moral or ethical question, visiting with those who we trust to provide sound and loving guidance.

But ultimately, God calls us to step forward in faith as he did with Abraham and as Jesus did with his disciples—and to do so without having all the details of what that may involve. Many of us have done so in a variety of ways over the course of our lives. Having had our seminarian Ryan Klobassa with us the last two months and visiting with him about the whole discernment process regarding priesthood, I have thought back again to my own thinking about priesthood back in the late 1970's and early '80's. I won't go over all the details (you have heard them before), but one element of that process is relevant to what I am talking about. In the years I worked in Des Moines, I did experience a gradually growing sense that God was calling me to priesthood, but I was not completely sure about it. I prayed for direction and guidance; I really did: "Lord, please help me to know what you want of me." The problem was that I was looking for an absolutely crystal-clear, no-doubt-about-it answer to my question, and I wanted that specific answer right away (it reminds me of the classic prayer: "Lord, give me patience, and give it to me now!"). Through prayer and visiting with loved ones and close friends, it gradually dawned on me that I needed to act on what I thought God wanted of me—God wasn't going to make the decision for me. I was waiting for that Western Union from heaven (nowadays, of course, it would be an email from heaven...) to tell me what to do, but God wanted me to use the faith and freedom he gave me to decide and to act. And let me hasten to assure you: I am still learning what this business of living and acting by faith is all about—I continue to be a work in progress in this (I sure hope it's progress!) just like the rest of you; we are all works in progress in the faith and spiritual life and we will be till the day God calls us from this life.

I recently came across a wonderful image that summarizes so well what this life of faith is about. Imagine yourself on a beach at high tide—the sea flows onto the beach and draws back into itself with its receding waves whatever is on the beach. Some boats, however, are tied by ropes to a post or a dock and so do not flow back out into the sea. The author then says that God is like that sea—he sends out his word and his grace like a wave to embrace and invite us to "flow" back into himself and into the immensity of his divine love. Some, however, may be tied by the ropes of earthly attachments, old habits or simply by fear of the unknown—and so they choose to stay in their comfort zone instead of venturing forward. And so the question is raised: "Will they one day know the intoxication of the open sea, or will they be like the boats that stay on the shore and become corroded by sea salt?"

We know how Abraham answered that question: he said 'yes' to God's invitation to move forward in faith even if he did not understand how the divine promises could possibly be fulfilled. And yet they were. Again from our reading from Hebrews: "Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen." God grant us all the desire to grow and act in faith, to be strengthened in hope, and to be immersed forever in that sea of divine love.