

## **The call and the promise**

2 Peter 1:1-11

March 15, 2009

Do you feel secure? Do you feel secure today? Do you feel secure today in your faith?

Do you know that God is on your side? Do you know that God is with you? Do you know where your life is going and do you know how to get there? Do you know that, at the end of the day, it will have all been worth it, and that it will be good?

Are you confident that whatever comes -- that whatever comes! -- you will have courage enough, strength enough, faith enough to meet it, and that the outcome -- whatever it is -- will bring joy? Do you have joy now? Today?

Do you feel secure in your faith?

We have been talking about our faith using the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith as a guide.

*Wait a minute ... our faith? Isn't faith a personal thing? Isn't faith an individual thing?*

Yes, faith is personal, but it is not private. Faith is personal, but it is not individual. When we are baptized, we are baptized into the faith and family of Jesus Christ. We are baptized into a family, a believing community, a community of believers that share a common faith. We share a common story. We become part of that story, a story that gives us a new name and a new identity, a new direction and a new life ... together.

Our faith is not something we make up or fashion for ourselves one by one by one, but something we receive as a gift, something that stakes a claim on our lives, something with which we have to come to terms in every aspect of our lives, by telling and retelling the story and by living it.

So we can and should talk about our faith, but we can talk about it in many different ways. The Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ is one way of talking about the faith we share, the faith that claims us once we have chosen to follow Jesus.

*We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father, and to your deeds we testify ...*

*To your deeds we testify!*

That's why I like the UCC Statement of Faith so much. It testifies to a God on the move -- active, engaged, purposeful, intentional -- calling, creating, seeking, judging, coming, conquering, reconciling, binding together. This is no God who "sits" in some far-off heaven waiting for us to find him or stumble upon him, but a God who seeks us out because ... because this God loves us! Because this God loves the world!

You know that. It's no news to you to hear me say that God loves us, that God loves this world, but think about what that means! Someone has his eye on you! Someone is coming after you! You better look because he might be gaining on you! Someone is coming after you, not to scold you or judge you or accuse you, but to love you, to set you free, to make you whole! Not to hem you in, but to let you out! Not to bring you down, but to lift you up!

Yes, we are called to serve, to sacrifice, to deny ourselves, to share in Christ's passion, but all for a larger purpose, a redemptive purpose -- to save us, to save our neighbors, to save our world. Ours is a life-affirming faith, not a life-denying faith. It calls us not to live less, but to live more.

So we are called. So God calls us. God calls the worlds into being, and God calls us into the church. These two calls, these two callings, these two acts of creation, frame the Statement of Faith. And now we end with a promise: *You promise to all who trust you ...*

*You promise to all who trust you  
forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace,  
courage in the struggle for justice and peace,  
your presence in trial and rejoicing,  
and eternal life in your realm which has no end.*

*You promise ...*

This is what God does. God makes promises. When you make a promise, you commit yourself. You put your reputation on the line. You put yourself in the debt of the one to whom the promise is made. *I promise ... This will be ... You can count on it ... You can hold me to it ...*

This is what God does. God makes promises! God doesn't say: *We'll see ... We'll see what happens ... We'll see how things turn out ... We'll see how you turn out ... That depends ... That depends on you ...*

God says, "I promise" and a promise is a promise, without conditions, unconditional. As Peter writes:

*God's divine power has given us everything we need ... He has given us the very great and precious gifts he promised, so that by means of these gifts you may escape from the destructive lust that is in the world, and may come to share the divine nature.*

In other words, what God promises, what God gives, sets us free and allows to become ... like God, to bear the image of God we are intended to bear.

So God calls us, and so God makes promises to us: *You call us into your church and you promise to all who trust you.* The call and the promise.

So, which comes first: the call or the promise?

The call comes first in the Statement of Faith, but I'm not sure it's fair to say the call comes before the promise either logically or sequentially, because God's promise is not contingent -- on anything! It's not like God's call comes first and the promise is given as a reward for faithfully fulfilling the the call. A promise is a promise is a promise.

On the other hand, the promise really does not come first either. It's not like God makes us a promise, and then says, "OK, I also have this job for you to do." When God calls us into the church, it's not an afterthought, not something that may be important to faith, but not essential. God's call into the church, into a shared life of discipleship and service and witness, is at the core of our faith.

They go together: call and promise, promise and call. The promise is unconditional and the call is non-negotiable. God's call is a promise, and God's promise is a call. God's calls us into the church to live out the implications of the promise, and God makes us a promise to empower us to live out our calling.

It's like the question we discussed in Wednesday night Bible study this week: is living the Christian life hard or easy? To which we decided the answer is ... yes!

It's easy. It's easy because we can't miss! It's easy because we can't fail! It's easy because we can't lose! It's easy because there are no qualifications or prerequisites or entry tests -- all are invited, all are welcome. It's easy because we start thanks to the grace of God and we finish thanks to the grace of God and we are helped all along the way by the grace of God.

But it's hard, too. It's hard because Jesus asks us ... for everything! Following Jesus is a twenty-four-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week, lifetime occupation. It's hard because we will be pushed and pulled, tested and seduced, by all kinds of forces, hostile and friendly, trying to turn aside from following in Jesus' way. It's hard because the decision to follow must be made again and again, in every moment, in every situation.

Peter helps us again: *So then, my friends try even harder to make God's call and God's choice of you a permanent experience.*

Call and promise, promise and call. They go together. God's promise is a call, and God's call is a promise. Or to put it another way, following Jesus is not the way to gain a reward, it is its own reward. The way is the destination!

It is so important that we hold the call and the promise together. Otherwise, we end up with one of two most unsatisfactory imitations of true faith. Either we end up with "cheap grace" on the one hand, an empty promise that leaves us and the world unchanged and un-whole and still on the way to death. Or, on the other hand, we end up with a Christianity that is grim and exhausting and joyless, and ultimately, hopeless.

*You call us into your church and you promise to all who trust you ...*

The call and the promise. God's call is the way and God's promise is there, at the beginning and at the end and all along the way: *You promise to all who trust you ...*

Hmm. There is one condition, isn't there? There is one prerequisite to the promise ... trust. That is what God asks of you. Trust.

It's not so much that God makes the promise only to some, only to those who trust, but that those who do trust God will never be disappointed. Your trust in God is not misplaced. *You promise to all who trust you ...*

So put your trust in the one place it belongs! Stake your life on the thing, the one person, the one Lord, who will not let you down!

God promises forgiveness and grace. God is on your side!

God promises to be present in good times and bad. God is with you!

God promises eternal life. You know where your life is going!

God promises courage in the struggle. You will have enough to meet whatever comes!

These are God's promises to all who trust him. Do you feel secure? Can you feel the joy?