

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“The Heart of the Matter: A Steadfast Heart”

Rev. Dr. John Judson  
February 21, 2016

Genesis 15:1-12, Luke 13:31-35

She should have given up. She should have quit. By all accounts she had lived a faithful, Christ-like life. She had served her church. She spent hours in prayer. She helped her neighbors. But then she had a heart attack. It took her by surprise and she lost her job. Losing her job meant she lost her house. In some ways she was fortunate that she had a loving fiancé who invited her to live with him while she recovered. As she got better they planned their wedding. Then her fiancé had a heart attack and died. The shock was overwhelming, but at least she still had a place to live, that was until his children decided that the house was theirs and not hers and put her out on the street. She had no money. She had no place to go. She only had the clothes on her back. As I listened to her story as she told it to me at the Welcome Inn, a low-barrier day shelter all I could think of was here was a woman who had been completely faithful to God and this is what she got. She should have given up on God. She should have quit.

Abraham should have given up. He should have quit. By all rights Abraham should have told God that this covenant thing was over and done with. God had called Abraham several chapters earlier and Abraham had responded. He left the most prosperous part of the known world, the Fertile Crescent, in order to journey to a land that would be named later. He had left because God had promised to bless him with land, children and prosperity. Yet none of that was forth coming. So far he had endured famine, war and threats upon his life. By the time we reach chapter 15 Abraham has nothing except the makings of a great adventure story. So he complains to God and once more God reassures him...saying just wait. But all Abraham got was darkness. He should have given up on God. He should have quit.

Jesus should have given up. Jesus should have quit. He had come into the world, he had taken up his ministry, in order that the Kingdom of God would be inaugurated. And this Kingdom of God was an amazing and wonderful thing. This Kingdom of God was something that all Jews were looking for. The Kingdom of God would be that time and place when God would begin to rule and reign; when God's justice and righteousness would become the defining characteristic of the world. Jesus demonstrated this by healing, feeding and forgiving. Yet the result was that Herod was out to get him. Herod wanted to arrest and execute Jesus just as he had done to John the Baptist. In fact, Jesus seemed to understand that his fate would be no different from the prophets who had come before him. He would die for bringing the good. He should have given up on this. He should have quit.

What is fascinating in all three of these stories is that they did not quit. In the face of what would appear to be God's failure...the woman's loss of everything in her life, Abraham's lack of reward and Jesus facing death...they did not give up. They did not quit. They continued to be faithful day in and day out. The woman was a tower of Christian strength. She would take aside young men who were down on their luck, pray for them, encourage them and tell them to trust in God. Abraham continued to believe even when for years there were no children, land or blessings. Jesus continued on to the cross, even when he prayed that perhaps it would pass him by. How could they do this? How could they, seeing the truth around them, not give up? How could they not quit. They did not give up or quit because they had steadfast hearts. I realize that the term, steadfast, might seem a bit antiquated, or out of fashion. Yet it describes their inner

commitment and dedication to God in the face of overwhelming adversity. It explains their willingness to continue to follow and believe even when they acknowledge that the outcome of their lives is not sunshine and light.

It would be easy for me to simply say at this point...OK all of you ought to have steadfast hearts as well...and leave it at that. But the reality of creating that kind of inner commitment and dedication of our hearts to God is not easy. It is not easy because we are finite human beings. We are finite human beings who suffer pain, loss and heartache. We are finite human beings who fear the unknown. We are finite human beings who cannot see the future. And so creating a steadfast heart is never easy, but it is possible. It is possible if we connect ourselves to God and exercise our faith.

Creating steadfast hearts comes about by connecting with God. It is a relational endeavor. We learn to trust God not simply by thinking about God but by being present with and involved with God. In some ways this mirrors any other relationship. We learn to trust others not by thinking about them, but by being with them. We build trust by living with them day in and day out and discovering whether or not they can be trusted; whether or not we can invest our hearts in them. Sometimes, we discover that we cannot. Other times we discover that we can. In terms of being in relationship with God this takes prayer, worship and attentiveness. It takes being in conversation with God and discovering that God is present in and around us. It takes orienting our hearts toward God in worship and experiencing God's presence here in this place. It takes attentiveness as we look into our past and see those times and places where God undergirded us. The deeper our relationship with God becomes the more our hearts are made steadfast.

Creating steadfast hearts comes from exercising our faith. Just as we improve our hearts by exercising on a regular basis, so too do we improve our steadfast heart in the same way. What I mean by exercising our hearts is that we act upon our faith and trust in God. We step out of our ordinary routine and take some risks for God. Maybe we decide to give more of our financial resources to the work of God in the world...and discover that we still have plenty left. Maybe we give more of our time in the service of others...and discover that we still have enough time for ourselves. Maybe we work at forgiving someone who has hurt us...and discover that in so doing we are transformed. Our hearts become more steadfast through offering them opportunities in which we discover that God is present and God can be trusted.

Some of you might ask me, how do I know that this will work? I know because it worked for the woman at the Welcome Inn, and Abraham and Jesus. As we come to know their stories we see that all three spent incredible amounts of time connecting with God in prayer and exercising their faith, even in the face of great obstacles. I also know this because I have witnessed it first hand in many of your lives and in the lives of those you have loved. I have watched people face seemingly impossible choices and keep the faith. I have seen people make choices that would cause others to give up and yet they did so with peace. I have seen steadfast hearts holding fast to God and discovering the joy of so doing.

My challenge to you this morning then is this, to ask yourselves, how am I developing my own steadfast heart through connecting with God by exercising my faith?