

June 20, 2004
Genesis 12:1-4, Galatians 3:23-4:7
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“Room for All”

There was a young boy in a congregation we once served who had an active imagination. When he was four years old we would see him out in the yard, grimacing and growling and flexing his muscles in a torn t-shirt. When I called out to him, “Hi! Tim,” he would reply in a menacing tone of voice, “I not Tim. I the Incredible Hulk.” Other days, we would see him outside, standing on a crate preaching to the cows in a field next door. He was a boy with big ideas. For a long time we were not sure where his big ideas and vivid imagination would lead him. I am happy to report to you that he did not turn green and become the Hulk. He was ordained last week in North Carolina as a Methodist minister.

In recent years, several books have been published that describe the 100 people, ideas, inventions or discoveries that have changed the world. It is fun to think about the impact that a Plato or Kant, the Wright brothers or Alexander Graham Bell, Hippocrates or Salk, Mother Theresa or Gandhi have made on the world. These were all people with big ideas.

God had a big idea in mind when he called Abraham and Sarah to leave their family, kindred and native land for an unknown country. God wanted to give them a new land, a home and a huge family. God wanted to give them even more than that. The Lord wanted them to opportunity to be a blessing to others—not just to a select few but to the whole earth. Abraham and Sarah believed God. According to Genesis, they didn’t say a word. They just left for the journey. In spite of their old age, the distance they had to go, and the uncertainties of the trip, they believed God. They packed their bags and left.

Through their son Isaac, Abraham and Sarah had many descendants. Generations passed. Somewhere along the way, the big idea got smaller. The magnificent dream of a land, a people, and being a blessing to others became more like a catnap. There were times of joy and prosperity. But there were also times of disobedience and slavery. When the children of Israel were in bondage in Egypt, God delivered them by the hand of Moses. The people must have felt that they were in dreamland again. God gave them the law to guide their life together. Over the generations, they forgot that the law was given not to be a burden but a joy, not a curse but a blessing. The law was a sign of their freedom not their bondage. It was an expression of God’s grace. It was the way to live together in a healthy, grace-filled community of faith.

The people forgot the purpose of the law. The law became, as Paul said, a kind of guardian or disciplinarian. The Greek word is “paidagogos” from which we get our word “pedagogue.” It does not mean “school-master” or “tutor” as it is sometimes translated. The “pedagogue” was the household slave who took the children to and

from school and watched over them when they were not in school. The people paid less and less attention to their guardian and found themselves in bondage and exile again. Forget about others. Who had the luxury to think about God's plan for them to be a blessing to the whole world? It was all they could do to keep body and soul together. God's big idea seemed like one big impossibility.

The law was not the final gift. It was the means to something better. Paul tells us that the law had been pointing to Christ all along. Paul says, "The law was our disciplinarian until Christ came." God was not about to give up on the big idea given to Abraham and Sarah so long ago. God sent Jesus Christ to do what the law could not do. God sent Christ to set us free and to create a whole new family of faith. Jesus Christ is God's big idea. We are no longer minor children under the care of a guardian. We are God's children now. We are brothers and sisters of Christ. We are heirs together with Christ. The Spirit of God dwells within us. The Spirit cries out to God from deep within us the same words that were on the lips of Jesus, "Abba! Father!" Then we know who we are and whose we are. We are no longer slaves; we are free. We are no longer abandoned; we are adopted as God's children. We are no longer minor children; we are heirs with Christ. In our baptism we have put on Christ like a new suit of clothes.

You might say that we have come into our inheritance. Our inheritance is God's big idea to create a whole new family of those who have come to know God's grace in Jesus Christ. Our inheritance is the commission to be a blessing to others. We are to be a family in which "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all are one in Christ Jesus." We who were enemies, at odds with one another, are now one in Christ. God's big idea is for those Jews who were slaves to the impossible demands of the law to find peace with God through faith in Jesus Christ. God's big idea is for those Gentiles who were enslaved to other forces, desires, superstitions to find peace with God through Jesus Christ. God's big idea is to create a family of faith in which there is room for all.

How far do we take God's big idea? In the Bible, the followers of Jesus took God's idea seriously enough to change their ways of thinking and living. The slave owner Philemon welcomed his runaway slave Onesimus home, no longer as a slave but as a brother in the faith. From that moment on, slavery was a dying institution. Peter, the righteous Jew, entered the home of Cornelius, the Roman Gentile Centurion, and realized that God no longer made distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable people. He embraced him like a long lost friend. Jews and Christians sat down to eat together. From that moment on, the idea that all people are children of God was planted in the human soul. Women like Mary sat at the feet of Jesus to become disciples just like the men. From that moment on, the women's movement took hold in the church. People who had an abundance shared what they had with those who were poor and hungry so that there was no need or want in the church. From that moment on, social justice and human compassion were rooted in the fabric of the church.

I once heard William Sloan Coffin say that the level of revelation in Scripture is always greater and broader than the level of its implementation in Scripture. In other words, God has given us a destiny to be a community in which there is room for all. There are places in Scripture where God's big idea was not fully implemented in the fledgling congregations of the Roman world. Slavery was still tolerated as an institution; the role of women was not equal in every congregation; not everyone welcomed strangers into the church. Yet, the big idea was still there stirring up the waters, provoking change, encouraging love, moving hearts to justice, and opening doors to outsiders. You can't stop God's big idea. There are times when the church gives lip service to God's big idea, but the church has yet to practice God's big idea. There are times when the church has not welcomed all people in the name of Christ. The church has kept silent in the face of injustice, poverty and crying human need. You can't stop God's big idea. It will win out. It is rooted and grounded in Jesus Christ. The mission of the Holy Spirit is to see that it comes to pass.

Some time ago, I heard a pastor tell about his experiences as a guest minister in another city. While he was there, he visited several congregations that were known for their spiritual vitality. He visited an affluent, predominately white protestant congregation in the suburbs. All he heard the people talk about was how much they loved each other. That same day, some people took him to see a poor Latino Pentecostal congregation that met downtown in a store front church. All he heard about was how much they loved one another. When he was asked about what he saw, he said he didn't see what the big deal was. He said, "You don't need the Holy Spirit to get along with people who are just like you. If we could get the rich folks from the suburban church and the poor folks from the downtown church to know and to love each other in community together, then you would really have something to talk about."

We are all God's children. God has made each one of us uniquely in Christ image. We treasure our individual gifts, backgrounds, experiences and cultures. These differences do not destroy our fundamental unity of Christ. They enrich it. God loves each one of us; God loves all of us together. Our differences only point to the power of God's big idea to make one new spiritual family out of people whose backgrounds and ideas are different from our own.

The well known preacher Dr. Fred Craddock began his ministry in a small rural church near Oak Ridge, Tenn. When he served the church, the nuclear facility at Oak Ridge was under construction. Construction workers came from all over the country to work on the project. They lived in mobile homes, campers or wherever they could find a cheap place to live. Some of the workers began to visit that beautiful white clapboard church with its hand-hewn popular pews, kerosene lamps and old organ in the chancel. One Sunday after church, he suggested to one of the leaders of the church that they have an evangelistic campaign to invite these workers to faith and membership in the church. The leader suggested that they were not "our kind of people" and that they wouldn't fit in. He said he would call a meeting of the Board the next week to discuss it. The next week as soon as the meeting opened, one of the

Board members immediately raised his hand to move that to be a member of the church one had to own property in the county. The motion passed. There was only one vote against the motion. That vote was Fred Craddock. He was quickly reminded that he was the preacher and his vote didn't count.

Many years later, Fred Craddock and his wife were making a trip through Tennessee. He wanted to show her the church he had talked about so much through the years. It was hard to find because a new interstate had been cut through the area. Finally they found it. When he pulled up to the church he was amazed to see that the parking lot filled with cars, pickup trucks and motorcycles on a Saturday. He saw a sign that read, "Barbecue, All You Can Eat." The church had become a restaurant. They walked in. The hand-hewn pews had been removed for plastic and aluminum tables; electric lights replaced the kerosene lamps. The organ was pushed to the back of what had been the chancel. He looked around and couldn't believe his eyes. In the church were all kinds of people, from all kinds of places, and from all walks of life, sitting down together, eating barbecue, hush puppies, cole slaw and drinking sweet tea. Fred Craddock turned to his wife and said that it was a good thing that this church was now a restaurant, because otherwise all these people wouldn't be welcomed here.

God has a big idea: God is creating one new family of faith that has room for all. Has God's big idea caught hold of you?