

WHY SHOULD WE DO IT?

Genesis 12:1-3

James Russell is a psychologist who has stated that all human activity is prompted by desire. He speaks against those that say it is possible to resist desire in the interests of duty and moral principle, because duty has no hold on someone unless he desires to be dutiful. He states that a human differs from other animals in one very important respect, and that is that he has some desires which are, so to speak, infinite, which can never be fully gratified, and which would keep him restless even in Paradise. The boa constrictor, when he has had an adequate meal, goes to sleep, and does not wake until he needs another meal. Human beings, for the most part, are not like this. The four desires Russell lists are acquisitiveness, rivalry, vanity, and love of power.

Acquisitiveness is the wish to accumulate as many things as possible. This often comes as a reaction to the fear of having little. Rockefeller grew up in poverty, so sought in life to gain as much wealth as possible. No matter how much you acquire, the desire is never satisfied.

That is bad, but worse is rivalry. A great many men will cheerfully face impoverishment if they can thereby secure complete ruin for their rivals. Some see this as the cause of our present state of taxation.

But rivalry can be upstaged by vanity. Russell writes in lieu of social media:

Vanity is a motive of immense potency. Anyone who has much to do with children knows how they are constantly performing some antic and saying “Look at me.” “Look at me” is one of the most fundamental desires of the human heart. It can take innumerable forms, from buffoonery to the pursuit of posthumous fame.

But the most potent of the four impulses, Russell argues, is the love of power. Power, like vanity, is insatiable. Like the expression says, “Power corrupts, but absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

What moves us to do what we do? Is it those desires or gaining things, rivalry with other, vanity, and the love of power? Aren't we supposed to be motivated by love?

What moved Abraham to do what he did so many years ago? Why did he leave his homeland to go live in a foreign land he never has visited? Was he doing it to gain more? He was rich enough to have a large herd of animals and servants, but did he want more? God promised that his descendants inherit the land of Canaan, the land where God led him. But he had no contrast, no way of assuring that he could gain any of it. In fact when he died Abraham only owned a cave he bought from the Hittites to bury his wife Sarah.

Did Abraham go for the sake of rivalry? When he got to the new land, he allowed his nephew Lot to live in the most fertile area. In fact by going to this new land he was getting away from potential rivals in his homeland.

Did Abraham do it for the sake of vanity? After all, God promised that he would be the father of a great nation. But that couldn't happen unless he became a father. His wife Sarai was not able to have children, and when Abraham got her servant Hagar pregnant to serve as a substitute, God used rivalry between Sarah and Hagar to have Hagar and her son Ishmael forced away.

Did Abraham do it for the pursuit of power? We have to understand what Abraham did with the power he had. In the world he lived in, as it still is in many ways today in that part of the world, the idea of patronage is so important. You don't get a job just because a company uses statistical analysis on you; you have to be related to someone. This may smack of cronyism to us, but in this way people were taken care of. Women were placed under the care of men who had the means to help them. In the story of Ruth her mother-in-law Naomi begs her to return to her homeland of Moab because she has a chance of receiving such patronage from her people, but little chance in Naomi's homeland of Israel. In the story of Naboth's vineyard King Ahab desires the vineyard, but Naboth refuses to sell it. It was not that Ahab was not willing to pay top dollar for it. It was that Naboth would be not continuing on the family ownership of the land. For Abraham to leave his homeland was to cut himself off from so much potential power. He would not have his relatives around. He would also be leaving the place where his ancestors were buried.

So why did Abraham leave his homeland? As we ask that, we should think of what motivates us. The main reason why students go to college is to land a good paying job, a job that allows us to acquire things. Young workers work hard to get things like new cars and their own houses. Later we want to have the ability to live our years in comfort. That can lead us in life to rivalry as we compete with "the Jones's" next door, vanity as we desire credit for what we do or try to get it through our children, and finally the desire for power so that things go our way in life. How cynical that can seem! Yet, that is what led Adam and Eve to eat that forbidden fruit. It is what leads us to do so much of what we do.

But Abraham left his homeland. Why? Because he was given something from God that is not a desire to accumulate, to win a rivalry, to center on "me," or gain power. God gave Abraham faith. "Abraham believed in God." All those desires come back to "me." But faith is directed to God, not "me." Why? Because faith is not something that comes from us, something we choose, make a decision about, think up, or invent. It is God's gift to us. Jesus said in our Gospel lesson, "Unless a man is born again, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God." Birth is not something we do, but something done to us. Likewise in baptism we are born again to a new life. We receive faith, which lifts us out of the trap of "me" to center instead on God.

Abraham was given the faith to look to something beyond his desires. He trusted that God would bless him and his family, not because it was the logical decision. The logical choice would have been to not leave his homeland. Abraham trusted simply because God said so.

Faith is what makes us willing to leave behind other things to follow God. That does not mean like Abraham we have to move to another place. But it could mean giving up an activity because we need that time to spend taking care of the family God has given us. It may mean

taking a less paying job because another job may force us to do things we think are unethical. It may mean having tension with a roommate because we decide to get up on a Sunday and go to church. It may mean going through a pregnancy because we do not see abortion as an option. It may mean getting out of a relationship because it tempts us to do wrong. It may mean giving up some of the time we want to do what we like to do to help someone else. We do it not to fulfill the impulses of acquisitiveness, rivalry, vanity, and the love of power. We do it because God has given us the faith of Abraham.

Abraham believed in God's promise of a great nation controlling the land of Canaan, modern day Israel. God has given us an even clearer view of that promise in His Son Christ Jesus. Why do we follow Him? Because we have faith. No, we haven't reached that "land," but we can trust in it even as we stand by the bed of a loved who is about to die, as we get the bad news from the doctor, when the shock of tragic news hits us. In faith we follow Jesus to the promised land.