Sunday, October 23, 1988
GOD PROMISES (No. 5 in a Series: The Statement of Faith)
Matthew 7:7-12, 11:28-30

In this sermon series on the Statement of Faith, we have looked at some new metaphors for God. In addition to describing our experience of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I have suggested that we also think of God as Mother, Lover, and Friend.

In last Sunday's sermon, titled "WHY THE CHURCH?" we were more specific about how our faith is lived and practiced as part of the church of Jesus Christ. The Statement of Faith reminds us that "God calls us into the church," and then goes on to tell us what being part of the church can mean: "God calls us into the church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be servants in the service of the whole human family, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory."

Today, in the final sermon of this series, we are reminded of what God promises: "God promises to all who trust in the gospel forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, the presence of the Holy Spirit in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in that kingdom which has no end."

The Christian faith is filled with promises. Listen to some of them as recorded in the Bible:

"Wait on the Lord; be of good courage, and God will strengthen you: wait, I say, on the Lord."

"The Lord is our keeper; the Lord shall preserve you from all evil; God will preserve your soul. The Lord shall preserve your going out and your coming in from this time forth and even forevermore."

"Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. God does not faint or grow weary; God's understanding is unsearchable. God gives power to the faint, and to those who have no might, God increases strength. Even young people shall faint and be weary; they shall fall exhausted; but those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint."

"Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink... Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet God feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness, and all these shall be yours as well."

"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and those who seek find, and to those who knock, it will be opened."

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life; those who come to me shall not hunger, and those who believe in me shall never thirst. I am the light of the world. Those who follow me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life. I am the resurrection and the life; those who believe in me, though they die, yet shall they live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

The Apostle Paul also knew of God’s promises. He wrote: “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love God, who are called according to God’s purpose. If God is for us, who is against us? In all these things, we are more than conquerors through God who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ our Savior.”

These are just a few examples of God’s promises as remembered by God’s people and written down in the Bible.

But the question that is bothersome is — why do we have so much difficulty in believing and acting on these and other promises of God? If these promises and others in our faith are true, then it would seem to follow that we would be the most joyful, free, unafraid, open, and inclusive people on earth. Also, it would seem that others hearing these promises of God for the first time would say, “I want God to be active in my life. I want to be a part of the church. I want to have the power and joy which are promised in the gospel to all those who follow the way of Jesus.”

What is it that holds us back?

First of all, we are, for the most part, egotistical, self-reliant, independent individuals. We don’t like to admit that we need help from anyone, even God. We don’t like to admit to any weakness or need. Call it pride. Call it self-centeredness. Call it what you will... one of the most difficult things in life is to admit deep down, “I need help.” To be able to say it and mean it—“I cannot live this life on my own power — I am connected to others and to God; therefore, I cannot live this life adequately and dynamically without God and the help of other people”—is a difficult thing to do.
Sometimes a tragedy has to occur, or some kind of low point in our lives before we are willing to admit that we cannot live this life without God and others; before we begin to trust in the promises of God.

Catherine Marshall, in her book Beyond Ourselves, tells about this experience in her own life. She had always been aware of God’s promises, but she said she never really lived her life as if she believed these promises. It wasn’t until after she had tuberculosis and was hospitalized that she came to admit deep down that she could not live her life without God.

Here’s how she described it: “Despair settled in. Often during those discouraging days, there was a vivid picture in my mind. I was groping my way along a pitch-black tunnel. Finally, one day, I realized that I had to turn the keys and the management of my life over to God. There I stood and took the plunge. It amounted to a quiet pledge to God — no visions, no choirs of angels, no sawdust trail. I said in a simple prayer, ‘From this moment, I promise that I’ll try to do whatever you tell me for the rest of my life, insofar as you’ll make it clear to me what your wishes are. I’m weak, and many times I’ll probably want to renege on this. But God, you’ll have to help me with that too.’” This, she says, was the turning point in her whole life. From then on, she slowly died to her old life and was born again.

A second reason we hesitate to live our lives on the basis of God's promises is that we tell ourselves that we first want to settle everything intellectually in our own minds — the problem of miracles, what prayer really is and how it works, what God is like. We want to understand all these mysteries logically and rationally. Then we'll be ready to accept God's promises and live on them.
What we forget is that in many other realms outside of religion, we don't always insist on completely understanding everything before we act on it. I don't understand how nuclear energy or even how electricity works, but I still turn on the lights and use them. Arthur Compton, physicist and Nobel Prize winner, said to his Sunday School class one day, "Every great discovery I ever made, I gambled that the truth was there, and then I acted on it in faith until I could prove its existence."

A third reason we hesitate to accept the promises of God and live our lives accordingly is that we're afraid to take the risk. We don't want to get too deeply involved with God. Who knows what that might lead to? Our whole system of values might change. We might find ourselves becoming more self-giving than we ever imagined.
C. S. Lewis put it this way: "When I was a child, I often had a toothache, and I knew that if I went to my mother, she would give me something that would deaden the pain for that night and let me get some sleep. But I did not go to my mother — at least not until the pain became very bad. And the reason I did not go was this: I did not doubt that she would give me that aspirin; but I knew that she would also do something else. I could not get what I wanted out of her without getting something more that I did not want. I wanted immediate relief from pain, but I could not get it without having my teeth permanently made right. I knew she would take me to the dentist, and I knew those dentists; once they got started fiddling about with my teeth, they would soon be working on all sorts of other teeth that had not yet begun to ache. They would not let sleeping dogs lie. If you gave them an inch, they took a mile."

And Lewis went on to say: "Jesus is something like that. If you give him an inch, he'll take a mile. Dozens of people came to him to be helped with one particular sin of which they were ashamed or which was obviously spoiling daily life. Well, he will cure it all right, but he will not stop there. That may be all you asked, but if you once let God in, God will give you the full treatment. That is what all committed Christians have discovered."

So we frequently avoid God's promises. We're afraid of getting too involved.

The Bible reminds us, and the lives of committed Christians make clear, that when we commit ourselves to God and accept God's promises, amazing and surprising things happen. Through nineteen centuries of Christian history, there is a luminous trail of broken lives that were renewed; of human relations that were redeemed; of hate transformed into love; of despair changed into hope; of mourning turned into joy. I think of one person who, when asked whether he actually believed that Jesus changed water into wine, replied, "I don't know about that, but I know that he has changed beer into furniture in my home."

In his book On the Road, Charles Kuralt tells of meeting an unusual woman in North Carolina. Her name is Pauli Murray. Her story is one of reconciliation and triumph, the story of God's promises come true. It is also the story of a church in North Carolina that has been there since 1848.

The story begins with pain and disgrace. It begins with a rape. The rape was committed in the days before the Civil War by a wealthy young North Carolina lawyer named Sidney Smith. His

victim was a young slave woman. Nothing unusual about that in the sorry annals of slavery. But in this case, the baby who was born, named Cornelia, was recognized by the white family.

The lawyer's sister, Mary Ruffin Smith, listened to her conscience, and her conscience told her that this child, born a slave, was also, after all, her niece. When the time came, Mary Ruffin Smith, the white slaveowner, brought Cornelia, the slave child niece, to the village church to be baptized. She was then ten years old.

On Sundays, Cornelia used to sit up there in the balcony during worship services, standing to sing with the rest of the congregation, "O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come." She was 21 when the Union Army came and set her free. She married a black Union veteran from Pennsylvania, who built a house for them to live in. It was the house Pauli Murray grew up in. She is Cornelia's granddaughter, part black, part white, part American Indian. Her grandmother taught her, as she grew up, to be proud of all those things, and she never forgot.

She left the house to become a fighter for civil rights as long ago as 1938, to become a lawyer and a professor of law, poet, and author. And then, at the age of 62, to become something else. She entered the Episcopal Seminary to study for the ministry. In January 1984, she was ordained the first black woman priest in the Episcopal Church. Did I say black? She would say black and white, African and Irish. She was ordained at the Old Chapel of the Cross, at the very altar where her grandmother was baptized as a slave.

Pauli Murray knows that the promises of God are true. She knows that in Christ there is no east or west or south or north or black or white. She knows the words of Jesus are true: "Come unto me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

"God promises to all who trust in the gospel forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, the presence of the Holy Spirit in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in that Kingdom which has no end. Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto God." Amen.