

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
The Spirit at Work: Commitment  
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Genesis 12:1-5; Acts 13:1-3

It was the very first official holiday observance in the United States. It was created by the Continental Congress on December 18, 1777 as a national day set aside for “solemn Thanksgiving and praise.” Though you may think that this had something to do with celebrating the 4<sup>th</sup> of July and the signing of the Declaration of Independence, or that it had something to do with the Mayflower, it did not. Instead it had to do with a two little-remembered battles that took in late September and early October 1777. Our revolution was not going well. Washington was holed up and fighting a guerrilla war, his army at risk of being destroyed. The populace and foreign nations were still suspect of our possibilities of victory. But then at Saratoga, a small force of Continental soldiers defeated and drove back a larger British force, thus ending Britain’s ability to invade from the north and convinced France to become our ally. Why does this matter this morning? It matters to me anyway because what made that victory possible was the commitment made by young men like my then seventeen-year-old great, great, great, great grandfather Benjamin Denslow. Along with thousands of other men and women, they made a commitment to a cause they believed in and were willing to give their lives for.

Benjamin’s story came back to me this week as I thought about our two Biblical stories. In each of these stories our faith ancestors were willing to make a commitment to God for a cause they believed in and were willing to risk their lives for. Let’s begin with Abram and Sarai. As their story begins, they are happy, healthy and doing well in one of the great trading centers of Mesopotamia. They had servants, flocks and herds. Then Abram has an encounter with an unknown God who strikes a bargain with him. If Abram and Sarai will make a commitment to get up, go some place they have never been, a place that is unnamed, then God will commit to bless them and through them bless all the nations of the world. A commitment is made, and they go in order to change the world. Our second story is of Paul and Barnabas. Paul and Barnabas have a good thing going in Antioch. They have an active ministry and are well respected. But the spirit has other ideas. Paul and Barnabas are asked by the Spirit and the church to make a commitment to go to tell others about Jesus the messiah. This will not be an easy lift, yet they commit themselves to this cause in which they believed...that Jesus had come to change the world.

These are all rather dramatic stories of commitment making. And it might be hard for many of us to believe that we had or could make such a commitment. Yet, all of us who have gone through confirmation, joined a church or had our children baptized have made a commitment as dramatic as those we have talked about. We have done so because we have made a commitment

to be part of God's great cause of working to help make God's Kingdom come here on earth as it is in heaven. I realize that this is not the way we often think about the commitments we make here at church. Often, we think about them as commitments to believe certain things in order to become a particular kind of person...a better person, which is true. Yet at the same time our commitment calls us to live as a particular kind of people not only for ourselves but for the world. As writer and artist Makoto Fujimura puts it, we are to be about creating a "culture of care" rather than a "culture of war", and a culture of an "opened hand" and not a "clenched fist." What can we do to create these new types of culture? We can live in imitation of the one who made a commitment to the world and kept it at the cross. We can live the Table (the communion table). Living the Table means doing three things. First, we love radically. When Jesus went to the cross, he went there for all human beings; not just those who look like or think like us. He saw all persons as worthy of God's love. So, like Jesus we are to see and love all persons as children of God; each worthy of our care and respect. Second it means forgiving unconditionally. When Jesus was on the cross he forgave those who crucified him, without condition. He did not wait for them to figure out who he was or what he was doing. We are to do the same, being open to reconciliation even with those who hate us. Finally, it is to give lavishly. Jesus gave everything on the cross, including his life. When we give lavishly it reminds us that what we have is not ours but is God's and is to be shared.

We are to make this commitment to this way of life because it is the way of Jesus. It is the way of the table of community. It is the way that Jesus taught his followers to live. We are not to abandon it because it is uncomfortable or inconvenient. We are not to abandon it for personal or financial gain. Instead we are to hold fast to our commitment to be people of the table. If we are honest though we will admit that holding to this commitment is as difficult for us as it was for Benjamin, or Abram, or Sarai, or Paul, or Barnabas. It is difficult because the world does not always appreciate the way of the Spirit, the way of Jesus. Yet we can do it. We can do it because we are not alone. We are not alone because we make our commitments in community...in the heart of a Spirit led people. We can do it because the Spirit has promised not to leave us or abandon us. We can fulfill our commitment.

The challenge I offer you on this day then is to ask yourselves, how am I fulfilling my commitment to the Spirit to love radically, forgive unconditionally and give lavishly that I might play my part in God's great cause of God's Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.