

The discovery channel: Sunday, March 11

*Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Luke 13:31-35; Philippians 3:17-4:1*

by [Hal W. LeMert Jr.](#) in the [February 28, 2001](#) issue

Some grow in their faith by imitating the faithful. Some enhance their faith through study. But today's lessons suggest that faith involves discovery. Discovery happens in the moment when we shout, "I see!" In that moment we not only learn what was discovered, but we make our own discovery.

The apostle Paul was trying to express this when he asked Philippian Christians to "join in imitating me." His suggestion did not arise from a satisfaction with himself. He writes of his anguish when people live as "enemies of the cross"—an experience he had known firsthand.

But the Philippian Christians had to do more than hear the phrase and follow instructions. "Join in imitating me" involved challenging all the allegiances that laid claim to their lives. Only as they discovered who they were in their own integrity—apart from external pressures—could they move toward saying, "I am a citizen of heaven."

Centuries before Paul, another man had discovered his true identity. We find Abram in a Genesis story "cutting a covenant" with God. The ritual involved cutting animals into two halves from nose to tail. According to the ancients, when the halves were laid apart opposite one another, a holy space was created. After it was dark Abram saw visions. We translate what he saw as a smoking fire pot and a lighted torch. But what Abram himself experienced was the discovery that his life belonged not to himself but to God.

Why did Abram need to go to such lengths? To discover for himself that God had great plans for him, greater plans than he could cobble together out of his own desires. He "believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). If we modify the translation slightly, it is possible to read, "And he discovered the Lord's will; and the Lord attributed the discovery to him as righteousness." Righteousness can be understood as living the humanity which God wishes us to live. The experience enabled Abram to reflect God's glory for all who

came after him, and suggests that we ourselves may be hindering God's design for our lives.

In the dusty days of Rome when Paul was alive, it must have seemed that the glory of God found little expression in human society. As the 21st century opens, the glory of God seems equally eclipsed. "The god of the belly" was Paul's image for human allegiances that destroy justice and love. Destructive allegiances dominate our society too. Our groans or joys over interest-rate changes remind us that we measure and are measured by economic worth. Thus people with little economic strength have little value to us. Third World scenes flash across TV screens unnoticed, and poor people scarcely make us uncomfortable even when we pass them on the street. Why be concerned for them when we are not poor? Even our children are sent to schools where the discussion is not about creative challenge but about the budget. Is self-serving affluence a god? The god of the belly? Are there any citizens of heaven? Where is our allegiance? Our citizenship?

In his Gospel, Luke leaves no doubt that Jesus Christ was the "citizen of heaven." Some unnamed Pharisees came to Jesus with a concern for him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." To their warning, Jesus replied, "Tell that old fox to stuff it!" His only commitment was to his Father in heaven. Herod himself knew of Jesus's allegiance to God, and that alternative allegiance made Jesus dangerous. It was not just his popularity that threatened the tetrarch, but his teaching. "Do not fear those who kill the body and after that can do nothing more." What was a kingdom if people were able to give or withhold their allegiance to a king? The clarity with which Jesus saw his commitment to God is what we wait to discover in ourselves.

These lessons ask us to identify the provinces of power that demand our allegiance. One such province is in our family ties. Jesus had harsh words for these family allegiances. We have all wondered about his stinging challenge not to love father or mother more than himself. Beyond the family, society lays claim to us. Our political commitment and our religious commitments insist that we lay aside the complexities of truth in favor of party spirit or doctrinal purity. Partial truths make good politics but leave little room for the kind of human interactions that uncover the nuances of truth.

A religious community can pressure us not to think outside the lines of its doctrine. We must, of course, make commitments and honor allegiances. But Paul's

experience warns us that even religious commitments can defeat the purposes of God. We must examine all our allegiances for their capacity to distort our integrity. Until we do, we embrace only a distorted kind of citizenship in heaven.

Nearly lost in the cacophony of voices bearing down upon us is the voice of Jesus the Christ, "You are the salt of the earth." To that affirmation he adds a warning. If we allow our God-given salt, the essence of what we are created to express, to lose its saltiness, we will be of little use to God. To that end Paul's words come to us, "Our citizenship is in heaven." Faith depends on that discovery. When we are brave enough to seek the discovery, we will know exactly who we are.