

July 4, 2010
Proper 10 Year C

2 Kings 5:1-14
Galatians 6:1-10, 15-16
Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

I think that Paul's letter to the Galatians is one of my favorite books in the Bible. Because when you get beyond the formality of most traditional translations, you see that Paul was really engaged with this congregation, and that this was a church that was NOT a holy gathering of sainted "super Christians" but of real life, flesh and blood, everyday, normal people.

Listen to this passage in Eugene Peterson's paraphrase version, *The Message*:

Live creatively, friends. If someone falls into sin, forgivingly restore him, saving your critical comments for yourself. You might be needing forgiveness before the day's out. Stoop down and reach out to those who are oppressed. Share their burdens, and so complete Christ's law. If you think you are too good for that, you are badly deceived.

Make a careful exploration of who you are and the work you have been given, and then sink yourself into that. Don't be impressed with yourself. Don't compare yourself with others. Each of you must take responsibility for doing the creative best you can with your own life.

Be very sure now, you who have been trained to a self-sufficient maturity, that you enter into a generous common life with those who have trained you, sharing all the good things you have and experience.

Don't be misled: No one makes a fool of God. What a person plants, he will harvest. The person who plants selfishness, ignoring the needs of others – ignoring God! – harvests a crop of weeds. All he'll have to show for his life is weeds! But the one who plants in response to God, letting God's Spirit do the growth work in him, harvests a crop of real life, eternal life.

So let's not allow ourselves to get fatigued doing good. At the right time we will harvest a good crop if we don't give up, or quit. Right now, therefore, every time we get the chance, let us work for the benefit of all, starting with the people closest to us in the community of faith.

...Can't you see the central issue in all this? It is not what you and I do – submit to circumcision, reject circumcision. It is what God is doing, and he is creating something totally new, a free life! All who walk by this standard are the true Israel of God – his chosen people. Peace and mercy on them!

It appears that there was some stress going on, and we understand that. There was..."discussion"...about what you need to do to be a Christian, about how "real"

Christians behave. The key question for them was, do Gentiles have to become Jews in order to be acceptable to God? After all, Jesus is the *Jewish* Messiah. He made it possible for all people to become part of Israel (God's people), and to be part of Israel – well, you have to be circumcised. There were many who didn't want to admit anyone who wouldn't undergo that procedure.

And Paul says, “No, no, no! You've got it all wrong!”

I suspect the Galatian church was under stress. I don't know what kind of stress – maybe converts were down. I assume that circumcision thing wasn't real popular and maybe everyone who was willing to do it had already done so. Maybe there was some local harassment going on: “Oh, so you follow that Christ now – the old ways aren't good enough for you!”

We know that under stress family systems may draw strict boundaries about who's in and who's out, “our way or the highway”, and that often they define boundaries and behaviors based on differences that are reflections of their *general* culture, not their founding theology/values/principles.¹ And churches are very much like families in this regard!

Ann Tyler wrote a novel called *St. Maybe* where one of the major characters is a storefront congregation formed in the 1950s named “The Church of the Second Chance” (which, by the way, I think is a GREAT name for a church!). One of its founding principles was that no member could watch TV. Years later the founding pastor admitted that he regretted that rule – because it drove people to watch TV and then lie about it, or to leave the church because they couldn't follow that rule, and really, he said, it wasn't about TV at all – but about how we feed and nourish our souls.

The church in Galatia was struggling, as all churches struggle, to figure out how to live together in a Christian community. And I think that they were different than us in that the notion of “being Christian” wasn't just an adjective for them, but it was the primary identification they held. Remember that in the ancient world you were no one as an independent individual. All of your identity came from the family, the clan, the groups to which you belonged. And when you joined the church you were often expelled from those primary groups that gave your life meaning. The Galatians didn't just “go to church”, they understood that they were called to “BE the church”. And J. William Harkins notes that they were struggling with “the art and discipline of living in a Christian Community...based not on the law of Moses but on the Spirit of the Messiah.”²

It is human nature, I think, to turn to what is safe and comfortable, what is known and controllable whenever there is stress in our lives. But the truth of the Gospel is that Jesus

¹ J. William Harkins, *Feasting On the Word: Year C, Volume 3*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, (Louisville, KY: John Knox/Westminster Press), 2010, p.208

² Harkings, p. 210

calls us to a risky life – a life that is rooted in compassion, literally, *feeling with* each other. And when you feel with someone else you are risking feeling their pain and anxiety as well as your own. (Woo hoo! More stress!)

The Dalai Lama has said, “Be kind to everyone you meet, for everyone is fighting a fierce battle.” Paul took it a step further and said, “Bear one another’s burdens, and in *this* way you fulfill the law of Christ.” You’re only accountable for your own choices – so will you look at others’ with compassion or criticism? Will you choose isolation or community?

In the 1980s Robert Bellah wrote a book called *Habits of the Heart*. It was based on the work of Alex de Tocquville, who had written about the extraordinary sense of community he found in the brand new nation of the United States. Bellah was noting the break down of a sense of commonwealth/community in the U.S., a rise in the willingness to criticize without equal commitment to work for the common good. I don’t believe much has changed in that regard over the last 20 years. Who goes to town meetings or even neighborhood meetings any more? Voter turnouts are consistently lower in elections, particularly in non-presidential elections, as if nothing important happened in our communities. Try getting people to PTA meetings. In fact, it feels as if a spirit of avarice, of clutching at what is “mine” to keep it away from you having any, a spirit that demands yes/no, black/white/ right/wrong answers pervades all our institutions and our culture in general. Even in our churches, in all the major denominations, there have been spiritual bloodlettings in the last decades over issues of who can and can’t be ordained, who is or isn’t a real Christian, whether you can follow your conscience or you must follow *mine*.

I had an interesting merger of events this week. I scanned Dennis Shaunessy’s column in the *Sun* about how he would not get a pro-life license plate for his car even though that is his belief, because he felt it would make him a target for extremists. The same day I read an article that reminded me that the last time an abortion provider was murdered, it was as he served as an usher in the Lutheran church where he had been a long time, active member.

In our congregation we have differences – about the politics of immigration, the ethics of economic policies, and the morality of abortion. We have differences of belief about sexuality and even about how God works in the world. Thanks be to God! For despite all this, we are bound together by the trust that God does work in the world and in and through our lives, for the healing of those for whom Christ died.

Paul cries, “A new creation is everything!” Not that the world is transformed but that the way we look at it and react to it and value each other is changed because we trust in God’s love and compassion for us.

Again, Harkins says, “Compassion is a practical...virtue that transcends law and invokes grace in action, joy in the spirit. It respects the dignity of all human beings. In this spirit,

bearing one another's burdens with grace is not burdensome slavery, but freedom in Christ.."³

Think about your life in this community. There's probably someone here this morning with whom you disagree, about whom you think, "Hmmm...how can I avoid talking to him/her at the fellowship time?" And I want you to commit to praying for that person this week. Ask God to help you see their burdens and to find the way to share the love of Christ with them. This is how Christ continues to act in the world, in the lives and the words and the actions of those who love him.

If I say "Nickle Mines, PA" it probably doesn't mean much to you. It is the town that houses an Amish community where, in 2006, five young girls were murdered and five seriously wounded by a lone gunman. Perhaps you remember the astonishment and disbelief expressed by the media when the community announced that they did not hate the gunman, Charles Carl Roberts IV and that they would pray for him and his family.⁴

Did you know that some of them took food over to his family that very day? That they shared with his family some of the cash donations that came in from Americans sharing their sorrow, setting up a fund for the surviving girls and one for the Roberts children? THAT is living in a new creation.

Should we all start driving a horse and buggy and wearing plain clothing? Wouldn't necessarily be bad. But it's not necessary. But we can live that kind of grace.

"So let us not grow weary in doing what is right...whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith."

³ Harkins, p.212

⁴ Carole E. Holtz-Martin uses this event as an example of radical forgiveness in reference to this periscope. *Feasting On the Word: Year C, Volume 3*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, (Louisville, KY: John Knox/Westminster Press), 2010, p.213