

Pentecost 2C 2010  
Proper 5  
Texts: 1 Kings 17:8-24  
    Psalm 146  
    Galatians 1:11-24  
    Luke 7:11-17

“The one who formally was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.” Galatians 1: 23

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

**We have entered Ordinary Time, also known as the “long green season.” It is the time after Pentecost where we hear again and again how to be disciples. If Advent through Pentecost is the “so,” the season after Pentecost is the “so what.”**

**Advent through Pentecost tells the story of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus and the giving of the Holy Spirit. The season after Pentecost asks very pointedly, “What difference is this story going to make in your life and how are you going to live now that you know this.”**

**For the next five weeks we will be reading the New Testament lesson from Paul’s letter to the Galatians. The importance of Galatians to Christian theology cannot be overstated. Augustine acknowledged its message of salvation by grace through faith and Martin Luther found in it his defining theology.**

**Galatians also gives the Church its “first complete statement of Gentile Christian theology.”<sup>1</sup> Remember, Peter and James were involved in the Jewish Christian community. Paul saw his particular ministry as a call to take the gospel of Jesus to the Gentiles-those pagan outsiders.**

**It is Galatians themes of justification by grace through faith, the necessity of the cross, the importance and power of the Holy Spirit and**

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<sup>1</sup> The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary. Ed. Paul J. Actemeier et al. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) p. 357

**Christian freedom that makes it, as one New Testament scholar has described, “the fountainhead for all subsequent theological reflection.”<sup>2</sup>**

**Because Galatians is so important to understanding our faith and because the new Revised Common Lectionary gives a preacher the chance to more fully explore a book in depth, what is going to follow is a five-week sermon series on Galatians.**

**Today I will lay out an overview of Galatians and begin the unfolding of Paul’s arguments to the Galatians. Each week will include a major theme of Galatians and how Paul saw that theme as crucial to the faith of the Church.**

**It is my hope that after these five weeks you will have a better understanding not only of the issues that Galatians addresses in the very early church, but also have an understanding of the “so what,” what Galatians says to us today and why it is important to how we decide to live our faith. The issues that Paul so vehemently addresses in Galatians are not that different from what we are experiencing in our lives and church today.**

**Galatians was written between 50-57 C.E., a mere 20 years after Christ. Even so, it is not the earliest letter of Paul’s; that honor goes to First Thessalonians. It appears that Paul evangelized this community of non-believers rather unexpectedly. On his missionary trip he got very ill and it was the Galatians that nursed him back to health. Going to them was not a part of his original plan. The Galatians treated him very well and he writes that he “was welcomed as an angel.” (4:14)**

**While he was with them the young community demonstrated a deep and abiding faith, one filled with “dramatic manifestations of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>3</sup> By the time he was well enough to leave them he was confident in their faith and belief.**

**It was with much surprise and alarm that he comes to find out that they are being swayed by Jewish-Christian missionaries that are telling them**

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<sup>2</sup> Richard B. Hays. The New Interpreter’s Bible. Vol. XI (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000) p. 183

<sup>3</sup> *ibid* p. 184

**that they must be circumcised for them to be full members of the covenant.**

**What is crucial here is to understand that these missionaries were not non-Christian Jews seeking to have the Galatians abandon their faith, but Jewish-Christians who were adding to the requirements of being a true Christian. This was an intra-Christian dispute; a family fight. Paul accuses the missionaries of preaching a “different gospel,” a rival gospel. This is a crisis about two different interpretations of the gospel.<sup>4</sup>**

**In this letter you will hear some of the strongest language in all of the New Testament. The language in Galatians is biting, offensive and urgent. It shows a very angry Paul who feels betrayed by those he converted. For Paul, nothing less than the soul of this little community is at stake.**

**The missionaries were telling the Galatians that circumcision and Torah observance, Law observance, were necessary for membership into the covenant people. Putting these conditions on covenant membership negated the sufficiency of God’s grace.<sup>5</sup> These missionaries saw Paul’s gospel as incomplete, maybe even deficient, and they were bringing the Galatians a new and improved gospel.**

**Paul insisted that only the cross of Christ was necessary and was the basis for their relationship with God. No outward mark, no following of any law, could or would confer God’s grace. Grace was a gift given by God, it was not something earned by humans.**

**Paul pits his apostolic credentials against all of the missionaries credentials as they were questioning his right to be an apostle. Paul tells the Galatians that he was called by God, set apart from his birth to preach the gospel. He insists he was commissioned by no less than Christ himself who revealed himself to Paul on the road to Damascus.**

**If Christ commissioned him, he needed no human to confirm it. Could these missionaries that were trying to get the Galatians to adhere to Law observance make that same claim? No.**

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<sup>4</sup> ibid p. 185

<sup>5</sup> ibid p. 186

**In our reading for this morning Paul tells them again about his earlier life, how he persecuted the Church. He tells them that he not only persecuted it, but how he “violently persecuted the church of God trying to destroy it.” (1:13) Paul, by his own admission, not only instigated the deaths of men, but imprisonment of women and children as well.**

**Paul, known as Saul before his Damascus Road experience, was also one of the worst persecutors in that not only was he righteous about his persecution; he had others do his dirty work. At the stoning of Stephen he incited the violence and then stood back and held the cloaks of those the killed him. Paul was not a nice guy with those he disagreed with theologically.**

**To understand how vehemently Paul was against the message of circumcision being necessary for covenant membership you need to understand where he came from. Paul belonged to the Pharisee’s-but not just any branch of the Pharisees. Paul was a Shammaite Pharisee, those that followed the strictest interpretation of Torah. N.T. Wright, the Anglican Bishop of Durham and one of the foremost New Testament scholars living today, likens this branch to “militant right-wingers.” Think the Taliban of Pharisism and you wouldn’t be far off the mark.<sup>6</sup>**

**The Shammaite Pharisees were devoted to strict adherence to Torah, which was political as well as religious. It meant having a revolutionary zeal that included violence that “comes close to a holy war.”<sup>7</sup> Before his Damascus Road experience, Paul militantly believed in anything that it took to bring Israel a political victory and to bring those failing to observe the Torah into obedience.**

**So, for Paul to so thoroughly denounce these missionaries whose message was Torah observance was astounding. The difference between Saul the persecutor and Paul the apostle could only be due to one thing and that is the transformative power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It was that transformation, that miracle of turning his heart from one of militant righteousness to militant love that caused others to glorify God.**

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<sup>6</sup> N.T. Wright. What Paul Really Said. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) p. 27

<sup>7</sup> *ibid* p. 27

**The questions of tradition and continuing revelation, the place and work of the Holy Spirit in different places and contexts, the role of religious righteousness and passion in proclaiming the gospel are not only questions wrestled with by Paul and the Galatians, they speak to the very issues we as a society and culture are struggling with today.**

**The amount of religious violence in the name of God, regardless if perpetuated by Christians, Jews, Muslims or Hindu's, regardless of whoever advocates it, stalks our world and our hearts. We need only turn on the television news or open the daily paper to learn of the latest zealous defense of God and the intolerance and violence that results.**

**Less visible, but no less violent are the every day attitudes and anger we hold in our hearts that would deny God's grace and mercy to others. The Jewish-Christian missionaries put additional requirements on the Galatians over and above the recognition of God's grace, thereby making God's unconditional gift conditional.**

**Are we really so different? What requirements do we lay on others, consciously or not, about what it takes to be a member of the Christian community or of our church? What people do we not want to sit next to in our pews? What people or groups do we find unworthy of God's free gift of grace?**

**We ignore these questions at our peril. In denying God's gift of grace to others we may find ourselves outside of that grace as well; not by God's doing, but by ours. If we do not look at these questions we may well find ourselves being the false teachers and proclaiming the false gospel that Paul warned us about.**

**If in the cross we are truly united in Christ, and if faith in God is the only thing necessary to be part of the covenant people, than there is no room for triumphalism or division based on race, sex, ethnicity, cultural expectations, traditions or other false criteria.**

**None of these will save us. Nothing we do, earn, have, or acquire has the power of grace. We cannot earn grace, we cannot acquire grace, we cannot buy grace-it is sheer gift, a gift none of us is worthy of, but that God has deemed to give us nonetheless.**

**As we examine our hearts over the next five weeks, as we listen to Paul in his impassioned pleas to the Galatians, let us not lose sight that Paul is speaking to us as well, calling us into account. Let us also remember that if God can so thoroughly transform Paul's heart, God can surely transform ours if we but let him.**

**To paraphrase the old television announcer at commercial break, stayed tuned, the best of Galatians is yet to come.**

**Amen.**