

Pentecost 4C 2010

Proper 7

Texts: 1 Kings 19: 1-4, (5-7), 8-15a

Psalm 42 & 43

Galatians 3:23-29

Luke 8: 26-39

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

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

Today is week three of our look at Paul’s letter to the Galatians; that Gentile community that nursed him back to health, accepted his proclamation of the gospel and then in their zeal to show their faith, turned from Paul’s teachings to the teachings of the Jewish-Christian missionaries that came after Paul and told them that to be true believers, true people of the covenant, they needed to be baptized AND follow Torah.

The Galatians as new followers wanted to be associated with the ancient faith of Israel. They wanted to be able to show with outward signs who they were. The law and its ritual expressions gave them not only an identity but also a structure. It offered them clear directions on what and what not to do and why they should or should not do something.

Paul knew all about zealous displays of faith. Before Paul’s call to serve Christ he was known as Saul, the most zealous Jew around, showing his faith by persecuting those Jews who followed Jesus and all those who did not strictly adhere to and follow Torah-the law given to Moses.

Saul believed that making all people follow Torah and getting rid of those that refused could bring about the redemption of Israel and the political righting of her fortunes more quickly. Saul was interested in the political redemption of Israel; Paul was interested in the redemption of God’s people. Saul’s zeal for religion was replaced by Paul’s zeal for faith, and they are two very different things.

In today’s reading Paul talks to the Galatians about identity and how one becomes a part of the covenant people. Paul argues that the law

was necessary before Christ, but that as Christ is the fulfillment of the law and prophets, that the law, specifically circumcision, was no longer a necessary identifier of the covenant people.

In fact, for the Galatians to be marked as the covenant people as the Jews were marked as the covenant people-through circumcision- would only reinforce the Galatians second-class citizenship in God's kingdom. This is what Paul is so upset about.

In a crucial portion of the epistle, one that is unfortunately not read as part the lesson, Paul is more than a little angry with the Galatians. He is quite frankly, ready to slap them upside the head. They made him so angry he was beside himself. But then again, it is those that we love the most that tend to drive us to the edge and back. Here is how Paul begins chapter three:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? Did you experience so much for nothing?

What you could see if you had the text in front of you is that all of Paul's sentences end either in exclamation points or question marks. I can just see Paul pacing back and forth, yelling at his scribe who is taking all this down:

“What were you thinking? Who pulled the wool over your eyes? Are you so stupid as to allow others, who have their own agenda, to determine your worth in the eyes of God? Are you? Or, do you believe what I preached to you; that through God's faithful work in his Son, you are heirs to the promise, that through God's faithfulness you now belong to God's people? God is sharing the Spirit with you and you are throwing it away. Are you more interested in signs and symbols or in faith in God?”

These are harsh words, shocking words, and they were meant to be. Paul is telling the Galatians that in their zeal to want to belong, they

have actually taken a course that will relegate them to a status of less than belonging.

Paul also tells them that they have belonged and were meant to belong from the beginning of time. It all started with Abraham who followed God's promise through faith; the Torah-the law-would not even exist for another 430 years. It was all about faith; God's faith in Abraham, Abraham believing in God's faithfulness, and God's gift of faith in sending his Son, Jesus.

Paul tells the Galatians that the law was necessary before Christ because Israel was young in its understanding of faith and God's work. Israel was child-like and so was given a guardian-a pedagogue. A pedagogue was a slave, not a part of the family. Pedagogue literally translates as a "child-leader," someone who, in the Roman-Greco world, walked the children back and forth to school each day.

Paul argues that the law was like that; it confined and guarded God's children in the interval between the giving of the law to Moses and the coming of Jesus who is the living symbol of God's faithfulness to God's people.

But now that Christ has come, the law has served its purpose. Now that Christ has come, God's people have grown up; they are adults and no longer in need of a pedagogue.

The sign of belonging to the covenant people for the Jews was and is circumcision; for the Galatians, for all Gentiles, it was and is baptism. What is crucial to know is that one did not strip the other of covenant belonging. That is the whole point of Paul's letter. God's covenant with the Jews was never and has never been abrogated. We are the ones who have been invited in, we are the ones who have been asked to join in God's faithfulness and as a result be a part of the covenant people.

To underscore this belonging Paul writes: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."

Paul takes all the major social classifications of significance in his world, religion, ethnicity, socio-economic status and class, and gender and says to the Galatians, “In God’s world, these no longer matter. In God’s world, these distinctions are irrelevant; they have no meaning.”

Paul doesn’t say that these distinctions no longer exist, he says they no longer matter; they no longer determine who is better or worse, clean or unclean, worthy or unworthy to be a part of God’s promise and faithfulness. They no longer are the core identity of anyone or any community.

In Paul’s time these distinctions were huge and they were taken for granted. Everyone, Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female knew how different each distinction was and how each determined the kind of life one could live. To say that these distinctions no longer mattered was radical and very counter-cultural.

Is our time really so different? Our categories may have changed perhaps, but we still argue over who should and shouldn’t belong, who is worthy to be called a Christian and who isn’t, why what we believe in any given denomination is better or truer than what other denominations believe. We still argue over it and we still kill each other over it and we still ostracize or shun others that have the courage to stand up and say, “Wait! This is wrong. This is not what God intended for God’s people.”

What are the categories that we hold on to? Is it race? Paul tells us, there is no longer white or black, Latino or Asian, or any other ethnic distinction we want to make matter. Sorry, but in Christ these distinctions become irrelevant.

Are the categories we hold on to having to do with a person’s sexual orientation? Paul tells us that there is no longer heterosexual and homosexual. Paul does not say that these distinctions are no longer among us, but that we belong to the covenant through faith. Sexual expression, regardless of where we stand on the issue of homosexuality, does not determine covenant belonging. These categories are not core to our identity as covenant people.

Are the categories we hold on to socioeconomic? Paul tells us that whether we have millions in our stock funds, are barely making a living trying to feed our families, or homeless and relying on the generosity of others, it is irrelevant. Regardless if we are dressed in the finest clothes or filthiest rags, God invites us into the covenant people.

We want so desperately to make these categories matter. It is as if by making others not belong, we belong more. “No,” Paul says. We are saved through God’s faithfulness, not our own and the God of the covenant is an abundantly generous God and it is through that generosity that we belong.

I read a story this week from a pastor who witnessed an interaction between two parishioners. There was some dissention in the congregation and one person approached another and said to her, “What is your opinion on such and such? Where do you stand on issue X?” The person with the questions was trying to put the other in a box, as if the person’s response would identify her as “one of us” or “one of them.” What the person was really asking was, “Who are you?”

The woman who was asked these questions had the most wonderful and theologically correct answer. She replied to her questioner, “I am a child of God, that is all that matters and all you need to know.”

When we become one with Christ, we do not say that other identities, events, and issues aren’t important. What we say when we are baptized is that as important as those other identities, events, and issues are to us, as important as we want to make some categories; these identities, events and categories, these boxes we try to put people in, pale in importance, are made irrelevant in Christ.

We all stand equal in the sight of the God through whose generosity we become a living part of the promise. This means we stand as equals with people we do not agree with, like, or want to spend time with. It means that the alternative community to the world, a world where we are bombarded with messages that money matters, looks matter, power matters, sex matters, that the alternative community of those who live in faith, is the way of Jesus.

Paul tells us that a whole new day has dawned in the coming of Jesus, a whole new day that brings with it a whole new creation and a whole new way of living.

I want to leave you with a story of an old rabbi. The rabbi asks his students how one could tell when night ends and day begins. One student answers, “When from a great distance you can tell a dog from a sheep?” “No,” replies the old rabbi. Another student asks, “When you can tell from a distance a date from a palm tree?” “No,” the old rabbi says. “Well then, Rabbi” asks a third student, “When can you tell when night ends and day begins?” The old rabbi answers, “It is when you look into the face of any human creature and see your brother or sister there. Until then, night is still with us.”¹

In Christ a new day has dawned, a new light has shone, a new creation has been born and as a result we have all been made one.

Amen.

¹ As found in Word and World by E. Louise Williams, The Broken Walls of Galatians as sited from Dorothee Sollee’s The Strength of the Weak: Towards a Feminist identity, trans. Robert and Rita Kimber (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 41.