

Pentecost 6 C

Proper 9

Texts: 2 Kings 5:1-14

Psalm 30

Galatians 6:1-16

Luke 10: 1-11, 16-20

“May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!”

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.

**We have come to the end of our reading of Galatians, a letter of great importance and influence. Today we heard all but the last two verses of the last chapter. In this chapter Paul brings together all his arguments against the Jewish-Christian missionaries and their teaching of the extra requirement of circumcision and living in strict accordance with Torah.**

**In this last chapter Paul also gives the Galatians advice as to how to live with one another and how to repair the damage done by the infighting and divisive theological differences that they were experiencing. This is advice that we desperately need to hear and adhere to in our day and age. The characters may have changed over the last 2000 years; the issues really have remained the same. Paul’s advice is as salient today and is it was all those years ago.**

**The very first thing Paul calls the Galatians to is reconciliation. He doesn’t tell them to ignore the conflict but he admonishes them as members of a community living in the new Spirit of Christ to go to one another and to address the issues, the transgressions, “in a spirit of gentleness.” All their dealings with one another as well as those outside of their community are to be based on the law of love and respect.**

**But, Paul tells them, they can only do that in gentleness if they have taken a good, long look at themselves first. Where have they fallen short? Whose forgiveness do they need to seek? How would they want to be brought back into a loving relationship?**

**Paul writes: “Take Care that you yourselves are not tempted.” It is so tempting to put our transgressions on a different level than someone else’s.**

**We humans have a real propensity to put our best against someone’s worst and then judge ourselves more worthy, more righteous and more deserving of God’s grace and mercy. To do so is a sign not of a Spirit led community but of a community led by the “flesh,” Paul’s designation of anything in this world that keeps us self-focused and not focused on the cross of Christ.**

**We tend to put up with a lot of very hurtful and un-Christian behavior in the Church. We allow gossip to occur and recur without addressing it and its effects not only on the one gossiped about, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, without addressing its effects on the person who is doing the gossiping! Such behavior is poison to the soul and to the community.**

**We are afraid of addressing issues that can and do tear churches apart for fear of offending someone. Paul tells us that we must, for the health of the community, address these issues, but not to address them in an angry and defensive manner, but in a loving, humble, and gentle way. The focus does not remain on the transgression but on helping the person who has transgressed find their way back into a Spirit-led life.**

**That is what Paul means when right after he cautions the Galatians about being tempted to think they are better than they are, he tells them to “bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”**

**The community has a shared accountability to one another and to God and part of that shared accountability is a shared support, a mutuality rooted in a shared identity as fellow travelers on the Way, fellow followers of Jesus Christ.**

**A sharing of those burdens isn’t just a sharing of someone’s pain, but a sharing of someone’s shame as well. It is helping that person carry the shame and to walk with them as that shame is replaced by forgiveness and mercy and until a new life begins to unfold in them. Sharing one another’s burdens is a shouldering of the knowledge that we are as**

likely to fall away and transgress as those who need to be lovingly corrected. And it is in that knowledge that we approach the individual and situation in humility.

Paul tells us that we all have our own load to bear, and that load is the knowledge that we can and we will fall away. But it is only after we have shouldered our own load of sin that we can help carry someone else's. It is only in the acknowledging our own sin that we can fulfill the law of Christ, which is love of neighbor.

Paul then tells the Galatians that they will reap what they sow. If they choose to live a life rooted in their own self interest, if they focus on the world's wisdom of how to live, then corruption of their spirit will follow.

But if they choose to live a life led by God's Spirit then eternal life is the harvest. This isn't to deny the sufficiency of God's grace for salvation, which is the whole argument of this letter.

It is, however, to acknowledge natural consequences of how one decides to live one's life and what guiding principles one's decisions are rooted in. So often we confuse consequences with punishment and they are not the same thing. Corruption of one's self isn't God's punishment for being rooted in the world, it is a natural consequence of deciding to live by the world's standards. Conversely, eternal life is not a reward for good behavior but a natural consequence of living a life rooted in God's love and service.

At this point in the letter Paul literally takes the pen away from the scribe and finishes it himself. "See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand!" He is telling them to really listen up. It would be like reading something in regular size print and then all of a sudden the type changes to a bolder and larger font, or like being written in all capitals. The message is that the following is really, really important.

He reminds the Galatians of the original and most contentious issue that occasioned the letter, "It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised-only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that

**they may boast about your flesh. May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.”**

**For Paul the cross of Christ was central. It was what united them. It brought forth a whole new beginning, a whole new creation was unfolding for them. Paul didn’t care about how many converts he made. Don’t get me wrong, conversion was important to Paul, but it was the opportunity to become a whole new person in Christ that mattered not the numbers.**

**He saw the Jewish-Christian missionaries emphasis on circumcision as people wanting to put notches on their belts-wanting to show how good they were, the number of “converts” being the trophy. No, Paul writes. “Neither circumcision or uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!” Religious rituals and rites do not save us, only God’s grace can do that.**

**I have to tell you, not much has changed. The Church is still focused on numbers as if the average Sunday attendance was a true sign of congregational faithfulness. Paul would be pretty exasperated with us, I think. He would tell us that it is how a congregation is growing in faith, how it is growing by being led by the Spirit that matters. Being that new creation in Christ is everything.**

**We also have our own divisive issues that divide us as Christians. Before we think that the only thing that divides us today are issues of human sexuality or biblical interpretation, we need to think again. Just yesterday I came across a story of a non-denominational primary school in southern California called Cross Roads Christian School. Three weeks ago all faculty that had not been baptized as adults and by full-immersion were fired. They had the choice to submit to being re-baptized or not having their contracts renewed for the following school year.**

**The pastor of the church that runs the school stated, “We are making sure our staff is 100% Christian-that they are born again and are level 4 Christians.”<sup>1</sup> He then supplied the teachers with the list of “approved”**

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<sup>1</sup> Episcopal News Service July 3, 2010 “Private Christian School Teachers Say Baptism Cost Them Their Jobs.” Episcopal Life Online

**churches that they could attend. Even though there were teachers on staff that were Episcopal, Catholic and belonging to other mainline Protestant denominations that accepted but did not require baptism as immersion, no churches of those denominations were listed. In chapel on day a little girl put on a skit where she wore dark glasses and said, “These are blind Christians. They think they are following Jesus, but they don’t.”<sup>2</sup>**

**It seems that our circumcision or un-circumcision issue is about full immersion or not, adult baptism or not. St. Paul is telling us the same thing he told the Galatians; it is the cross of Christ that has made all things new. We are a new people, a new creation because of the cross. We are saved by faith through God’s grace and nothing else.**

**To demand a particular type of baptism makes works of the flesh-in this example whether someone holds you under water or someone holds you and pours water over you, more important than the work of Christ on the cross.**

**To put any extra condition on God’s free gift of grace is to deny that God’s grace is sufficient. It makes God’s unconditional gift, conditional.**

**Five weeks ago I told you that the season after Pentecost was the “so what” season; the season where we learn to be disciples and how to be the Church; the season where we are asked to answer the question “so what difference does knowing Christ and God’s grace make in your life?”**

**It is a question we must answer every moment of every day of our lives. So, what’s your answer? Now, go live it.**

**Amen.**

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<sup>2</sup> ibid

