

I was up late working on this sermon. I went outside and the darkness blinded me. I could not see anything. I stood there a while on my deck and very gradually I began to make out various lights. I looked up and could see the stars. I looked around and could see lights on back porches around where we live. I could see the effect of a light over our garage door. Slowly, my eyes were adjusting. I went inside after a bit. I finished a section of this sermon and went to bed. I rose in the early morning light. It is one of my favorite times of the day. Often we are not up early enough to see the sunlight. Often we are in too much of a hurry to realize how the world looks as the sun begins to poke its rays through the trees. I realized it again last night and this morning. We often take light for granted. We need light to live. We need the light of God's Spirit to help us see things we already know are there.

Sometimes we do not have enough light on something. Paul is trying to shed some light on the first crisis in the early church. The problem is human tradition. People were in the dark. Some believed to follow Christ faithfully, Christians should obey the Jewish law. To follow Christ faithfully, some believed men should be circumcised. Gentile men who may have previously worshipped Roman gods or perhaps worshipped not at all, these men should be circumcised. After all, Jesus was a Jew. He followed the Jewish law in his own way; so should all Christian men. The logic, newly converted Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians as well. And men and women in the church should obey the Jewish law in order to follow Christ faithfully. This was the church's initial crisis. For us, this is not a big deal. It nearly divided the early church.

It nearly divided the many house churches of Galatia. As one scholar explains it, the problem here is "between God's gospel and human tradition." (218, Hays) So Paul writes, "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" (3:1) This entire letter, questions, claims, important events, an impressive rationale, all declare why this way of thinking is inappropriate. Paul instructs them to change their ways. Most importantly, he shares the gospel several times each time using the words and ideas of the point he is making.

This letter has relevance for us, not because obeying the Jewish law is a problem. I suspect there is no one among us who believes "to be a faithful Christian, we should obey the Jewish law." However, there is a tendency to substitute our own ideas and traditions for the gospel and its influence over the life of our own church.

Currently, there are quite a few human traditions bumping into church these days. One tradition began back in the 60s and 70s as American culture began to grow "officially secular, religiously pluralistic, and racially and ethnically heterogeneous..." (16, Robinson) Today this present itself as "soccer leagues," "We go skiing as a family!" "We have our family time on Sunday" And "It's our one day to rest and get things we need to do for Monday." Along with this, there come other notions people have about how church works for them. "Religion is fun if our church can be outwardly successful." Or this one. "It doesn't really matter what you believe; just come and love your neighbor." Or this one, "Don't worry about getting involved; just provide the children with moral instruction." Or this one, "What is important is the kind of staff we can assemble; the better the staff, the stronger the church."

What sheds light on these human notions is the gospel of Jesus Christ even as Paul explains it here at the beginning of his letter. He reminds us of two realities and where they lead us. If I could write these two realities and their direction on a blackboard, I would write the words: Story, revelation and mission. Consider with me these verses in this first chapter and how they give light to the traditions that challenge us.

The first reality is story. Paul reminds us we are called by God through his kindness. Theologically, unmerited kindness is called “grace.” We have a story here. We are called, Paul explains, before the foundation of the world. God calls us by name. God calls us in the waters of baptism. God calls us through the love and care of family. God calls us with our need and search for a particular congregation. Paul makes this clear in our reading. He re-tells in abbreviated form his own account of coming to faith in Christ. It is God’s apprehending him. God’s searching for and finding him. He believes, **“But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace...”**. He believes God was claiming him and his life, calling him for a purpose. All of us have our own story to tell. We do not have to have some dramatic account to believe in God’s calling us.

For our music meditation today, Mark played “Tell Me the Old, Old Story.”

*Tell me the story softly, With earnest tones and grave;  
Remember, I’m the sinner Whom Jesus came to save.  
Tell me the story always, If you would really be,  
In any time of trouble, A comforter to me.*

*Tell me the old, old story, Tell me the old, old story,  
Tell me the old, old story, Of Jesus and His love. (403, The Hymnbook)*

Here is a favorite old hymn that reminds us of this story and you and I are sinners who are called by God. Recently, I have become aware of how some shove this idea of call aside. They think church is about something else. Sometimes it is, but behind all that is going on is God’s call on our lives. You can believe we are making this up as we go. If we want power that lights up the church, consider God is calling you through his kindness.

The second reality, is revelation. Paul reminds us we are offered the revelation of God’s Son Jesus Christ. If the church is about anything at all, it’s light is the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It’s good news is the person of Jesus Christ. Some may claim they do not know who he is. Some may admit they are unsure of his true identity. If you are like many, there comes the need to begin a search for the truth about who he is. Read the Galatian letter through and you understand Paul believes the good news is this person, Jesus of Nazareth. I said he articulates this throughout this letter. In chapter 2, he says, **“It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me. The life I now live I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.”** In chapter 3, he says, **“But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian for in Christ Jesus we are all children of God through faith.”** In chapter 4, he says, **“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law in order to redeem those who were under the Law, so that we might receive adoption as children.”** If we struggle with understanding who Jesus is, it is time to pick up our Bibles and begin reading again to see what the gospels declare. If we struggle with understanding who Jesus is, it may be time to talk to a few of our Disciple Bible study friends to see what they have come to believe. If we want power that lights up the church, consider God continues to reveal to the world and to people like us his Son Jesus Christ.

There is a reason for this story and this revelation. God is offering this good news so that we may proclaim Jesus Christ and act like he did in this community and world. If the first word is story and the second is revelation, the third is mission. We have a mission. This is what the church is about. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer says in Life Together, “Therefore, spiritual love proves itself in that everything it says and does commends Christ.” (36, Bonhoeffer) Tony Robinson explains this by saying the church needs to undergo a shift from being givers to receivers who give. There is a cycle of giving and receiving from God and as we become aware of this reality we are empowered to give Jesus Christ to others. He also speaks of moving from a Board culture to a Ministry culture. Richard Hays, New Testament scholar at Duke says, “If we are to do justice to Paul’s testimony... we should dwell...on God’s act of seizing us and empowering us for tasks we could never have imagined.” (220, Hays) We have been called and offered the revelation of Jesus Christ for a

reason...so that together as a congregation we may proclaim Jesus Christ to those who will listen and act as he did to those who want his care. If we want power that lights up the church, consider God using all of us together to announce Jesus Christ and his compassion with hurting people.

Years ago one evening, I was driving towards the church on Three Chopt Road. I saw our steeple and thought, "If that steeple could be lighted by a brighter light, then people would know a church is here. They just might come and find out about Tuckahoe Presbyterian Church." I mentioned this idea to the Property division. They recently purchased lights to make our steeple brighter. Our church is and will be lighted brightly in the future. It will take a stronger kind of light to help us see what is important for our life as a congregation. This is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Sometimes we forget how important it is and we replace it with our own human traditions. We keep sharing this good news. **We are called by God through kindness and offered the revelation of his Son Jesus Christ so that together as a congregation we may proclaim Jesus Christ and act like he did to those who will listen and who need his care.** If we want it, here is enough power to light the church and send us where God wants us to go. Said another way, here is story, revelation and mission.

**Revealing God, we sometimes let human ideas and traditions push aside what is truly important and real for us in the church. Where we have forgotten you are calling us, enable us to hear your still small voice. Where we struggle to believe your Son Jesus Christ, enable us to come to faith in him. Enable us to know who he is and give our lives to him to do with as he pleases. Empower us with your calling and offering us the revelation that is changing the world so that we may tell this good news and live it with others.**

**We pray today for a hurting world. Let there be an end to this oil catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico. We pray for thousands of people who are losing their life and livelihood because of this. Help us to protect our world from ourselves. Help us to learn the lessons we must learn about taking care of this earth you have given us. We pray for hurting people in Haiti and Chile and China, people whose lives have been upended by earthquakes and aftershocks. Let us count the costs of giving as you have given to us. We pray for ourselves, for brothers and sisters who need your healing and hope and the very life and light you give. Keep teaching us how to pray. Let us see your working before our very eyes. We believe, Lord, help our unbelief. So we pray as you have taught us, "Our Father who art in heaven..."**

Works cited

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, Life Together, Harper and Row Publishers, New York, NY, 1954.

Hays, Richard B., *Galatians 1:11-24 Reflections*, The Letter to the Galatians, Introduction, Commentary and Reflections, The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume XI, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2000, pp. 181-350.

Robinson, Anthony B., Transforming Congregational Culture, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2003.

The Hymnbook, published by Presbyterian Church in the United States, Presbyterian Church of the United States of America, United Presbyterian Church of North America, Reformed Church in America, Richmond, MCMLV.

