

We're in the second of a series on Paul's letter to the church in Galatia. It's important to remember that Paul's letters addressed specific concerns to specific congregations. Knowing the background of these concerns helps us to understand the universal aspects of Paul's proclamation. With this morning's passage we jump-in immediately after Paul describes his conflict with other Christians in Antioch and falls in line with the larger scope of Paul's concerns to the Galatians. As Fred mentioned last week, apparently some Jewish Christian missionaries came into Galatia (which, if you have one of those bibles with a map in the back, you'll notice is in the middle of present day Turkey) and these missionaries were quite adamant that any non-Jewish converts must be circumcised. They saw the requirements of the law as a necessary stage that any non-Jewish Christians had to pass through in order to stand right with God. I imagine the men of Galatia had some practical concerns about this. But for Paul the issue is theological. This is at odds with what he believed to be the liberating and inclusive message of the gospel. So in 2:10-14 he chastises James, John and Peter, for accepting that Gentiles need not be circumcised, but then flip-flopping on that concession under pressure of the Jerusalem church.

Peter, along with other Jewish Christians, had welcomed both Jewish and Gentile Christians as part of the church in Antioch in Syria and shared meals with them - something previously unheard of. However, James seems to have understood the matters differently. Those who came from James' church in Jerusalem to Antioch insisted that Jewish Christians should refrain from table fellowship with Gentile Christians. Paul was infuriated that any distinction between Jews and Gentiles was seen as valid, but he was even more livid that Peter had flip-flopped under pressure of the Jerusalem authorities.

With that in mind, let us read Galatians 2:15-21.

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. *I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.* And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

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I've been around here at Tuckahoe for three years now, so you've gotten to know me a bit. I shouldn't surprise you then when I make the claim that, on the whole, I'm a pretty level headed guy. I don't tend to let my emotions get the best of me and when they do I try to reign in my tongue as quickly as I can. It takes a lot to make me mad. Neil Jordan made me mad. One of my favorite novels is Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*. You know I'm not making this up because we

named our son after the author. Reading the story was an electric experience - set in the background of World War II London, Greene weaves together a tale of love, lust, hate, faith, unbelief that is at once is moving, suspenseful, tragic, and ultimately hopeful. Few novels speak so powerfully to the modern conscience about the questions surrounding belief in a loving God amidst the turmoil of a broken world.

Alright, this isn't a book review. Anyway, I love the novel... Then Neil Jordan decided to make a movie out of it. I won't go into details because I think you should read it if you haven't had a chance, but I was so angry at the fact that the director quite intentionally re-wrote the story so as to make it the exact opposite of Greene's novel that I actually flew into a rage, taking off my shoe and hurling it at my friend's television set.

I was mad. You can't do that to a story. You can't rewrite a masterpiece that is so beautiful, so good and true and replace it with something inferior.

Paul felt like the missionaries that had gotten into Galatia were rewriting the story of the gospel and making the sacrificial death of Jesus part of the subplot rather than the central event. And he is mad. Graham Greene is one thing, but *the gospel*? Paul sees the narrative structure of this gospel story with Jesus, who is no less than very God, giving himself up to death on the cross in order to liberate humanity from bondage. Jesus' death, in perfect obedience to the Father, is both a loving act of faith in God and the decisive act of God's faithfulness to his covenant promise to Abraham.¹

Paul's theology is rightly understood as the telling and the defense of a story. At the center of that story is the gospel that "a person is justified not by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ" (v 16).² Sherry likes to remind our confirmation class that justification is what word-processors do to the lines of text to make sure that they line-up in right relation to the margins of the page. This is what God does to human lives. Messy sinners like us get straightened out and placed in right relationship with God through Jesus Christ. And the good news is that this justification happens for everyone, Jews and Gentiles alike are justified by grace. *And this act of justification really has nothing to do with us.* Jesus Christ alone has met the demands of obedience to the law and done what only God can do: straightened out human beings with God and with each other - obliterating and making arbitrary any kind of divisions that we set up to keep us apart from one another.

Paul tells the Galatian church, tells us - that for those who seek to follow Jesus, faith means living in accordance with the reality that in Christ, God has reconciled all things to himself and there

¹ Hays, Richard B. *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) p. 275

² Incidentally, there's a raging debate among New Testament scholars as to how the genitive in last clause of the phrase *pistis Iason Xristou* should be translated. Ever since Luther the standard practice when translating into the vernacular has been to describe God's redemption as coming through the believer's objective "faith *in* Jesus Christ." But, for the last twenty years, scholars have been asking whether it shouldn't be translated in the subjective, making it "the faith *of* Jesus Christ," the question then being, are we justified by our act of faith directed toward Jesus Christ as the object, or by the subjective faithfulness of Jesus Christ? The scholarly jury is out, but a lot is riding on the question. I tend to go back and forth in this sermon because I haven't had time to give the literature a fair reading, though I suspect that the alternative reading will be more faithful. I can't help but wonder if Paul was aware of the double meaning and meant to incorporate both realities.

is nothing that you or I can do to make that happen or to nullify the fact that it has happened. The missionaries that Paul is contending with sought to make salvation about Christ's death *and* participating in ritual acts prescribed by the law. And he is saying, to make any sort of qualification: to make salvation about Jesus and something else - be it Jesus and certain cultural practices, Jesus and the right spiritual exercises, Jesus and a specific income level, Jesus and a particular denomination, Jesus and this political persuasion, Jesus and being good enough - if the story of the gospel is about Jesus *and* something else, then the story becomes incoherent and in Paul's forceful words, "Christ died *for nothing*" (v 21.)

We can't make this story about something other than the faithfulness, obedience, and love of Jesus Christ. Even *our* faith, Paul reminds us, is a gift from God anchored in the death and resurrection of Jesus, not some act of will or intellectual ascent that we are responsible for. But the long and sinewy history of Christian worship and practice throughout the last 2,000 years has certainly seen in the story the marks of many an editor.

Maybe some of you have experienced in church, maybe not here, but somewhere the idea that religion is all about keeping the rules, having the right friends, that it's about doing things - being good enough, moral enough, right enough. But here's the thing. God is not impressed by how good we are. Religion is not about proving to God that we are worthy of his love.

You may think you don't think that. But let me ask you, how many of your hang-ups and your fears are riding on what you think other people are going to think about you? Whether you're going to be admired, whether you're going to be perceived as good enough at whatever you're trying to do. We get easily drawn in by the idea that we are loved because of what we can do - because that's what we see all around us. The world operates on a giant sliding scale where the ones who are valued the most are the ones who can contribute the most. Who hasn't from time to time bought into that sneaking suspicion that I am worth only about as much as I can offer to the people around me? That somehow, if I could just change the perception of the people around me - get them to accept me on their terms, whether that be because I'm smart enough, or funny enough, or athletic enough or good-looking enough, then I'd be worth loving?

If we do that to each other, then why do we think that logic hasn't crept in to how we think about God? The problem is, we keep running into this theme throughout scripture that tells us we can't possibly be good enough to earn God's love.

So often we are caught between the poles of telling ourselves on one hand that the Christian life is all about our best efforts to do good, as though through our goodness we can pay back the sacrifice of the cross - while on the other had we carrying around failures that make us constantly wonder, "did Christ die for *this*, too?" "Am I *really* right before God?" Paul is adamant that nothing we can do is left uncovered by the cross. Christ takes our stubbornness and our stupidity, our addictions and our traumas, our failures and our guilt, our arrogance and our greed and transfigures them through the cross. Christ is at work in the midst of our fragility transforming us and making us new. We don't have to win God over with our accomplishments - and it's a good thing because we just don't have the ability. We don't have to try to be good enough so as to keep the watchful gaze of an angry god at a distance, because when God looks at us, He sees the faithfulness of Christ.

So we who have gotten so good at trying to justify ourselves have to experience the disorienting reality of death in order to let go. John Donne, said it best - "That I may rise and stand,

o'erthrow me."³ In the cross, Jesus jettisons all of our striving after maintaining the appearance that we've got it all together, and invites us to simply trust that his faithfulness has done all the heavy lifting of salvation for us. So the invitation to take up our cross and follow is the promise that if we would stop trying to re-write the story, we will find ourselves drawn into it and transformed by it. To be sure, the cross looks and feels like death, but in this story death looks and feels like freedom. Trust Him, therefore. There's nothing else to do.

Thanks be to God.

³ John Donne, "Holy Sonnet 14", *John Donne's Poetry* 2nd ed. (London: W. W. Norton, 1992) p. 115