

In 1843, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote in his journal what has now become a well known maxim. “it is perfectly true, as philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards.”¹ This is certainly true of the Christian story. We can only understand faith from back to front. Jesus’ cross is understood in the light of his resurrection, his journey to the cross only in light of the salvation provided by the cross, his words and miracles only in light of his exaltation as Lord on Easter morning.² We understand backwards, but we live forwards - either way we look, we see the cross.

For the past four weeks we’ve been eavesdropping on one half of the conversation between St. Paul and the various churches of Galatia, piecing together bits of the controversies and sticking points. Throughout the passages, his central conviction has been that the salvation brought to us by Christ opens the door to a life of radical freedom. Not freedom to do whatever will serve our ends, but freedom to pursue the kingdom of God and in that pursuit find great joy. He is exasperated by a church that has heard the good news of God’s reconciliation through the cross of Christ, but on some level has failed to grasp the implications of how the gospel orders their lives. And so, instead of living forward into a new reality - they are unwittingly clinging to a past that doesn’t make sense in light of the cross. Having laid out his convictions in painstaking rhetorical style, Paul closes his letter with a final plea. Hear Galatians 6:1-2, 11-18.

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand! 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, 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! As for those who will follow this rule—peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.

From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.

In 1996 my High School basketball team was invited to play in a tournament in San Francisco. We had just come off of a first place finish in the South Sequoia League that was soured by a disappointing first round playoff elimination. In theory we were entering this tournament to

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers Vol I*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967) p. 450

² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans R.A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) p. 162

do what basketball teams do - execute the offense and the defense the way we had been practicing all year. That's not what happened. In the very first game it became perfectly clear that our team's season had ended with our playoff loss and we were now a loose band of individuals, each out to pad our own stats and seek glory on our own terms. We were there for a week - just 12 high school Junior and Senior guys without adult supervision - I think we only saw our coach when it was game time. So it goes without saying that in the off-times when we weren't playing, throughout the week, *my teammates went wild* - not me, you understand. The low point came in a game against the only Jr. Varsity team invited to the tournament. They were from the Bay area and had experienced a relatively successful season as a JV team, but had gone without a victory in the tournament. They didn't have a single player over six-feet and at six-two, I was the second shortest on our squad. Given what was an obvious miss-match, we approached the game with a kind of cavalier nonchalance that was evidenced by our pre-game warm-up consisting of a dunk-contest and half-court shots. Not me, you understand. We had already won a couple of games easily and lost a couple by narrow margins - we were no longer in title contention, so we thought we'd just goof around. I mean, *they were a JV team*.

An hour and a half later, there was silence in our locker room. This may come as a surprise to you, but it turns out you don't play your best basketball when you didn't sleep the night before or when your coach is hung-over. Hayden, our league's MVP, was the first to break the silence - he laid into our 6' 8" center for being slow and for allowing "a bunch of freshman" to get to the basket uncontested. Nick *was* slow, but then he was slow *all season* - we lost because we didn't play like anything resembling a team. Nevertheless, after the floodgate was open, we just tore into each-other - each one laying blame on someone else. No one really spoke during the five-hour car-ride back to Bakersfield - we just put our Walkman on and avoided each-other. (For those of you in high school, a Walkman is a device we used to use for playing music - kind of like an iPod).

I imagine the crisis in Galatia might have had the churches looking something like our basketball team. We fall apart when we live for ourselves. Paul's letter tells a story about groups of people who tended to think of themselves and others in terms of categories. If a Galatian Christian saw someone else from a different social or ethnic group doing something wrong, they would feel smug and think, well that's not the way *we* behave. These categories cut across all of the dividing lines that Paul is telling the Galatians the cross of Jesus eliminated definitively. A life shaped by the cross does not cheer in others' failures or seek to place blame on others. It bears the burden of others and seeks good for them. You used to live that way, Paul says, but the cross has changed *everything*. We are free from all that self-serving to pursue a life that is shaped by the reality of the cross.

John Calvin understood the implications of the cross to mean that "we are not our own". In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* he wrote,

We are not our own. Let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own. Let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own...We belong to God. Let us therefore live for him and die for him. We belong to God.³

Paul reminds the Galatians, reminds us one final time that the cross means we are free to live for others because that is how Jesus lived. Lives that are shaped by the cross can't escape living for

³ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969)

others. But if that's true, the other side is that lives shaped by the cross begin to find that we are lost without others.

For Paul that means some pretty radical things about the way that we order our lives together - namely that the church is irrelevant if it has begun to exist for itself. When it no longer orients itself toward suffering of the world with the mind to take that suffering on itself. So he tells the Galatians to "bear each other's burdens" because Jesus has already bore *your burden*. Charlie and I have seen it again and again - Charlie, no doubt, has seen it more - that as the church we are at our best not particularly when gathered in our Sunday best, but when we choose to enter into each other's suffering without flinching. We gather here to be strengthened and encouraged to bear each other's burdens.

As part of our on-going process of learning to be faithful ministers to the young people of this church our youth advisors read Andy Root's book, *Relationships Unfiltered*. Essentially the book is a critical examination of what it means for the church to "bear each other's burdens" in the context of adolescent relationships. According to Root, all ministry involves "place-sharing". It "is about connection, one to another, about sharing in suffering and joy, about persons meeting persons with no pretense or secret motives. It is about shared life, confessing Christ not outside the relationship but within it."⁴

You may have in mind what that looks like. In our life together that means entering into the other's suffering on *their* terms rather than ours. If you've ever been with someone suffering through terminal illness you know how important that is. More than optimistic reassurance that things are going to get better, they want to know that you are going to be there with them even if they do not. And if you will, *it will change you*.

Lest we think that it is up to us to enter suffering alone, Paul reminds us that we can be assured that Christ is with us because Jesus opened his arms to the world on the cross. When we suffer by sharing in each other's hurt, we are near to Christ. And the good news is that we do not do it alone - because Jesus has suffered, Jesus will transform our suffering. So do not lose heart because on the other side of the cross is a new creation.

That's the last thing that Paul wants to leave with us. A life shaped by the cross of Christ will begin to see new possibilities in the heart of the world's suffering. He calls this God's new creation.

There are people loose in the world who live as though they are free. Maybe you know what I'm talking about. I am fascinated by them. These people are subject to the same laws of gravity, yet there's a lightness in their demeanor. They have to pay taxes and obey the speed limit just like the rest of us; they have to eat and wear clothing and they fail at things they care about just like we do. But somehow within the network of all of these restrictions and limits and petty coercions, they live lives of grace. God often shows up through these peoples' lives in astonishing, surprising, unpredictable ways.

⁴ Andrew Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2007) p. 15. *Relationships Unfiltered* is a condensed version of this text aimed specifically at lay youth workers.

Not too long ago, I met one of these people named Shane Claiborne. Shane would probably not fit in most traditional churches. I don't mean that as a criticism - he just makes a lot of people uncomfortable. Example: within the community he founded in the Kensington neighborhood of North Philadelphia, he said there are three kinds of food - vegan, vegetarian, and *rescued*. He didn't explain that last category, so I'll leave it to your imagination. Shane's got long dreadlocks - *long* dreadlocks and he speaks with a high twangy East Tennessee accent that someone with long dreadlocks who eats rescued food has no business speaking with. With the discordant image and voice, he talks about Jesus with the conviction of a radical and lives what he speaks about. It sounds hard. His house has been broken into a dozen times and was burned down in 2009, he has been violently assaulted a few times - but he lives where he lives because he believes that the claims of the gospel required him to relocate to the abandoned parts of the Empire. The places that are forgotten. He found his way into a poverty stricken, drug and crime riddled part of Philadelphia because that's where Jesus sent him.

And where Jesus sent him, Jesus is using him to do some pretty amazing things. I'm not talking about gentrification - through the power of the Spirit he and his friends are creating a new community in the shell of the old one. They are helping drug addicts find work and stay sober - they are helping students stay out of gangs and in school. They are entering into the suffering of this world and in the process they are creating disciples who care for their own communities and reclaim abandoned spaces, providing a glimpse of the new creation that God is doing.

There are people loose in this world who live as though they are free because they have been transformed by the cross. May it be so with us.