

Oct 14 – Living with Integrity

Galatians 2:11-16

Paul writes about how he publicly challenged Peter in front of the entire church in Antioch. It seems harsh and even “un-Christian!” Why was it such a big deal that Paul did it and then wrote about it? Does it have anything to say to us today? Without a bit of background this incident and Paul’s defense of his actions seem irrelevant to us.

Antioch, in northern Syria, was the third largest city in the Roman Empire. Only Rome itself and Alexandria in Egypt were larger. It had a large Jewish population that mixed freely with the Gentile population. It is likely the Jewish community had attracted a large number of “god fearers,” Gentiles who were drawn to the worship of the one God but had not gone through all the steps to full inclusion in the Jewish faith. So it seems that as the early Jewish Christians began to spread the gospel message, it was at Antioch that they first began to preach extensively to Gentiles. It was from this church that Paul and Barnabas were sent out as missionaries. The multicultural Antiochene Christian community presented new challenges that had never been anticipated. Even the early Jerusalem council dealing with Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles had only dealt with the issue of circumcision. Paul understood that agreement to imply a comprehensive recognition of Gentiles on an equal basis with Jews. Some Torah-observant Jewish Christians interpreted the agreement less liberally. For them it had recognized an equal but separate Gentile mission. What was at stake was the question of whether there would be one united church or two split along racial and cultural lines.

This struggle came down to who ate at what table. We will see in a moment why this was such a big deal. We need to understand that there are no rules in the Torah that prohibit Jews from eating with Gentiles as long as the Gentiles were willing to eat Kosher. Since the “god fearers” had been a part of the Jewish community before becoming Christians, we can assume that this is not the problem. It comes down to what we in this day call, “the slippery slope.” Eat with Gentiles and fellowship with them and little by little you might give up even more important things and end up losing your Jewishness. It is safer to keep separate and not risk contamination.

From Paul's letter we understand that eating together had not been an issue at first. They had all eaten together, even Peter when he first arrived. Then a group came from James in Jerusalem expressing displeasure with such an easy-going association. Why did James object? There have been two possible reasons given. One was that James believed that Christianity was a new and improved version of the Jewish faith. He hoped that by keeping the Jews separate from the Gentiles the Jewish Christians would draw the Gentiles into full conversion and inclusion. The other idea is that in Jerusalem, at this time, the Zealot Party was in the ascendency proclaiming a radical separation from all Gentiles. They were assassinating tax collectors, Sadducees and even one High Priest for working with, instead of against, Rome. James may have been afraid that the easy free flowing relationships in Antioch would bring that church under attack from the Zealots. Why he sent word, we do not know for sure. What we do know was the result was potentially catastrophic. Without Paul's confronting of Peter, the Christian church we know today would look significantly different and our understanding of communion would be very different.

With their arrival, Peter moves to a separate table along with many other Jewish Christians. Even Barnabas, Paul's missionary to the Gentiles, who had defended their ministry to them at the first council in Jerusalem, moves to a separate table. Peter was likely friends with those who came from James. His base of operations was also the Jerusalem church. I am sure he was thinking, well just for a few days I will eat with them, and then go back to the way it was. I am sure he was justifying it on the basis of being pastoral to his friends who were upset. He didn't see any harm in it. Paul saw how damaging it was short term and long term. This is why he confronted Peter publicly and would later write about it. He wanted the hearers in Galatia to understand that Paul was consistent. What he was saying about all being equal in faith had been his word from the beginning and he would continue to confront any who opposed him.

What is the big deal? Does it help you to understand that in those days communion was celebrated at the end of a common meal? Since Paul did not say, "You share the bread and cup of communion together so too you should share the rest of the meal," which would have been a powerful argument, we assume that they were not

sharing together in communion. Now there were two cups, two loaves of bread. Separate and supposedly equal. Yet we know that kind of separation always comes with values attached. The Gentiles would have heard, "You are not as faithful as we. See, Peter, the disciple of Jesus, will not eat or commune with you." All of our understanding about being one at the table of Christ would dissolve. Even to this day some parts of the Christian church do not open the communion table to all, and if you go to their service it hurts to know you are not welcome at the Lord's table. From our beginnings John Wesley proclaimed that all were welcome. He saw the very act of communing, rubbing shoulders with others as you received the bread and cup, as being a means of grace.

Peter, to use modern political terms, flip flopped. He had been eating at a common table and now moved away. That physical action would speak volumes to all. Here was a disciple of Jesus and now he will not eat with us. We must be in the wrong. By his actions, Peter was proclaiming that separate was acceptable and the Jewish Christians were favored. Paul was not upset with the group from Jerusalem. He understood that they came from a different context and were being true to those principals. We can argue about whether they were correct in their understanding. We know Paul thought they were in the wrong. But they were, at least, consistent. When someone flip flops on principle it is incredibly disruptive to all.

We have all been in Peter's place, have we not? We have changed our position on some issue. It has happened because of prayer, reflection and, we would hope, growth through the guiding of the Spirit. We are comfortable in this new understanding because many of our friends and fellow worshippers have also come to the same place in their walk with God. Then one day we go out to lunch with friends who do not feel the same way we now do. They express opinions that we no longer support. What do we do? Do we just let it slide thinking, well this one time it won't make a difference? We don't want to be confrontational. Or, do we in as loving a way as possible try to be consistent with our new understanding? It is tough, at times, to live with integrity in our positions.

What we are talking about is different from being convinced to change your opinion. We all want growth. This is about being inconsistent. Peter had eaten with Gentiles since his experience with Cornelius the Centurion, and now was going back on these actions. We know how that would have been interpreted by all. Inconsistency is destructive. I have been around people who will tell you one thing in private about certain issues and say something else in public. They are unreliable. Going backwards is a worse sin as far as Paul is concerned. This is why Paul confronts him publicly. He realized that Peter, by switching, no matter what the reason, denies much. Flip-flopping is never good. We are called to stand by our principles.

So, I hope you see how all this still has application today. You pick the social issue that seems most contentious to you. You have an opinion. Others will have a different view. You have moved beyond where they are. Can you sympathize with them? Even more importantly, can you remain true to your principles even when they tell you that you are wrong or holding true means you will be judged and possibly lose them as friends?

Paul talks about a hard kind of faithful integrity, but one he believes is blessed by God. This was so important on this particular issue because it went to the core of what Paul believed it meant to be a follower of Christ. He believe all are loved by God. Anything challenging this must be dealt with.

We can have integrity in challenging situations. This is the hard work of Christian community. We try to live our faith and values with honesty but without putdown or prejudice of others. We also have to be willing to stand up to others when they challenge us. We have to live and proclaim the core belief of loving others as God loves us. We should challenge others when they do not hold up these values. We have to stay faithful when others tell us we are wrong. It is hard work. This part of the letter reminds us to understand what we believe. Live those beliefs consistently. And when necessary, stand up for them and at times challenge others because of them. For this is part of how we live faithfully and celebrate how all need to be seen as beloved children of God.