

Oct 7 – Claiming your Story

Galatians 1:15-24

Paul's letter to the Galatians is not usually a book of the Bible that we turn to for comfort and guidance. It is, in some ways, an angry letter written when Paul was feeling exasperated with the people in these churches he had founded early in his ministry. He seems to be dealing with issues far removed from our time and place. For these reasons many people only know from this letter the brief few verses concerning the fruits of the Spirit. Yet, this letter has much to say to us, particularly in changing times such as we live in. Over the next few weeks I am going to preach from this letter, lifting out of the angry and challenging words of Paul, nuggets of grace and hope. I hope you spend a little time reading the entire letter for yourself, as we will not touch on all it has to say in these sermons.

First, you need just a little context. It is helpful for us to know why Paul wrote this letter. It gives us a glimpse into the controversy surrounding the expansion of the Christian movement into Gentile communities in the ancient Mediterranean world. The identity of the newly established mission churches was up for grabs: were they to be understood as branches on the tree of Judaism or were they to be understood as belonging to a new and distinctive community, neither Jewish nor pagan? Were Gentile converts bound to accept Jewish practices and values? In what ways were they free to maintain their former ways of life? By the middle of the first century the struggle over such questions had burst into open conflict. It is to this issue Paul addresses his letter.

In Galatians we hear a message of radical grace apart from works of the law. This idea is at the heart of Lutheranism and Methodism. This letter became foundational for theological reflection about justification by faith, the power of the Spirit, and the meaning of Christian freedom.

Paul had founded the churches of Galatia during his first missionary travels. He had preached to them the message of "Christ Crucified" as God's transformative deed to deliver humankind from the present evil age. He had not said that circumcision and other Jewish practices were necessary to be a faithful follower of Christ. Believing Christ dies for our sins and living a life of love following his teachings was enough. At the time of the letter, Paul had received word that Jewish Christians had arrived from Jerusalem saying these new converts now needed to take the next step if they were to be full covenantal members. The

next step was being circumcised and following the other Jewish laws. It is evident in the tone of the letter that some had been persuaded to do just this and were now challenging others who had not taken this step. Paul calls this a perversion and his letter is an attempt to justify his interpretation of the Gospel.

After a brief welcoming statement, Paul launches into his defense of his understanding of the Good News of Jesus. He states that his message came directly from God, not from what he had learned from others. He then goes on to talk about how Jesus called him to be an Apostle to the Gentiles. This is where we picked up the letter today.

Paul shares his life story, all of it, from his persecuting the early faithful to his being called by Jesus on the road to Damascus. He does it not to brag but to give his words validity and to assert that he is truly an Apostle called by Jesus. He is not asking them to believe that his message to the Gentiles is true. He believes his life and call authenticates his words

You might be thinking, well this is an interesting bit of Biblical study but does it really say anything to my life circumstances? Galatians raises the issue of the relationship between tradition and revelation. Can the Christian message be formulated as a tradition, or is there something about the gospel that resists fixed traditional formulation? There is irony here. Paul, who claims to be a special apostle, the lone-wolf apostle, whose message was neither conveyed nor authorized by any church, becomes the source of a body of binding ecclesiastical tradition! Paul, of course, encouraged this development as he commended his churches for keeping the practices and teachings he had given them and scolded them when they failed to do so.

The tension between tradition and the continued revelation of the Spirit is still an issue for the church. Whenever we deal with great social issues there are those who hold up tradition refusing to hear another opinion. Others who are proclaiming new understandings say that they were led by the Spirit to see things in a new way. Both give compelling arguments. Which do you believe?

Let me give you a brief historical event. The role of women in ministry has been a challenge for generations. In some Christian churches they proclaim, "Paul said women should not have leadership positions and keep silent in the church." They refuse to budge. Other denominations, ours included, have been led, we believe, by the Spirit to see that the words of Paul were for a particular time and place and we are not asked to bring forward old

cultural stereotypes into the present. We believe women have been called to ministry just like men. I have been graced by their leadership. Our current bishop is a woman. But even now, some in the United Methodist Church have a hard time completely accepting the validity of women in leadership. There are denominations that do not allow women ministers and they say we that do are going against tradition. To be led by the Spirit is messy and not all will agree.

The United Methodist Church is gathering in February to talk about another divisive social issue, the place of GBLTQ's within the life of the church. Some proclaim that tradition means exclusion, others talk about the Spirit bringing a new day of inclusion. The only thing we can say for sure is that this gathering will be messy, not all will agree with whatever is decided, and some will leave the church because of it. Galatians reminds us that faith is not static, that the Spirit is challenging us to see and do things differently at times. But what that looks like, how we know when it is the leading of the Spirit verses self-centered opinions, that is the challenge and there are no easy answers. Do you begin to see the relevance of this letter?

Paul, believes passionately that his understanding of how Gentiles should be welcomed into the family of God is the right one. In part he believed this because he had seen the transformation in their lives after accepting Jesus. He also believed passionately in the theology of love that would not place undue burdens on others just for the sake of tradition. This is what he had preached and had seen great success. Now he is defending himself. In this part of the letter he is setting out his credentials for why they should believe him, instead of those other missionaries with different opinions. For me what he does is amazing. He tells them anew his story, all of it particularly the ugly messy stuff. He refers to his conversion on the road to Damascus and how Jesus had set him apart to be a missionary to people just like them. But goes on to say that he was on this road because he was the chief persecutor of the church! He doesn't hide from his past, but instead lets them see how God had changed and transformed him. He believes that change from persecutor to missionary is the best validator of his words.

I think about how we usually do just the opposite of Paul. When someone has a different opinion than us, we try to prove them wrong. I don't know how many times I have had a Bible shoved under my nose with someone pointing at a verse to let me know my error. I see their point but it is not convincing for I too have scriptures I could point to. Or, I see people wanting to win people to Christ but do it by telling them mostly about how bad

are the choices they are currently making in their life. Paul instead says to tell your life story, all of it. Let them see how God has changed and transformed you over the years. Live the faith as an invitation to others. It is compelling.

I am always more persuaded by people's actions than by words. When I see people I respect for their faith living out the gospel from a different perspective I begin to reflect more seriously on my position. I begin to ask, "Do I need to change?" Actions, not words have always had the power to transform.

Partially I hear the message of Paul in Galatians as being a challenge to live with the tension of diversity. Paul never demanded that those who had been Jews and came to believe in Jesus should now give all that up. He knew that following the laws of Judaism brought them some solace and stability. I am sure he even hurt for them as they were beginning to be turned away from the Synagogues they had worshipped in all of their lives because of their belief in Jesus. What Paul didn't want is for them to say is, "My way of experiencing the power of Jesus in my life has to also be your way." Paul wanted to hold the tension of diversity and see in each person's life how God, through the work of the Spirit, was at work in them. That is a messy way to do church!!

This is World Communion Sunday. It is a time we celebrate that we are a diverse people worshipping our Lord Jesus in many different ways as United Methodist, and as Christians of other denominations as well. I have been privileged to attend Black worship services, Pilipino worship services, Samoan, Tongan, Korean and Hispanic. All were United Methodist and all so different and yet so powerful.

God's Grace and Spirit is alive. It continues to bring with it the winds of change. May we be open to its message and may we, by our lives and our stories, live an invitational life that brings others to Christ. It was said about the early church, "See how they love one another." That love changed an empire. May it also be said of us, "See how we love all."