

HELD IN A GRACE GRASP
Living Letters: Called by God's grace
Galatians 1:11-24

The epistle to the Galatians is an emergency letter.
I have no idea how it was delivered to the churches in Galatia,
or how far it had to travel,
but as far as Paul was concerned it couldn't get there fast enough.
It was the kind of letter that, had there *been* the option in 55 A.D.,
Paul surely would have used email.
The subject line would have been, "URGENT!" In all caps.

Ancient letters, like Paul's, all have a wordy beginning.
Where we put names and addresses,
and then "Dear So-and-so,"
Ancient letters take several descriptive sentences
to say who it's from,
and several descriptive sentences to say,
"Grace to you and peace, church at Galatia."
In other words, "Dear So-and-so."

Then, the body of the letter begins;
in our N.T., usually not until 7 or 8 verses in.
Paul's *usual* pattern—after the "from me, to you, grace and peace, etc"—
is to begin the body of the letter with an extended polite introduction,
maybe reminiscing about their long and tender relationship,
or expressing thanksgiving to God
for what God is doing among them.
Even in his letter to the churches at Corinth,
who were having all kinds of bitter disputes
over worship, the role of women, sexual immorality, etc.,
even to *them*, he opens his letter
with tender words of thanksgiving.

Not so with his letter to the church at Galatia.
After his "from me, to you, grace and peace"
the first words out of his mouth were,
"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting
the one who called you in the grace of Christ

and are turning to a different gospel."
There wasn't time for polite niceties.
The very Gospel of Jesus Christ was at stake.
As was every community *formed* around that Gospel.
The Good News was being turned on its head, twisted,
corrupted to the point it was becoming *Bad* News,
at least to a large segment of the church.

By this letter, Paul was attempting
an emergency resuscitation of the Gospel,
trying to keep the Christian communities in Galatia
from having their life-breath choked out of them.

It's really *hard* for us to understand what all was at stake here,
but let's review.
Jesus was a Jew.
All his disciples were Jews.
He framed his whole message as a fulfillment of Jewish law.
His ministry was geographically centered in Judea.
After he left, the apostles in charge of the early church
set up headquarters in Jerusalem,
worshiped in the temple and synagogues,
and devoted themselves to a better practice of Judaism.
The church, sometimes called "The Way,"
was from the beginning, without *question*, a Jewish movement.
And despite strong hints *Jesus* gave pointing to a larger mission,
and even some hints in Hebrew scriptures,
nobody, but *nobody*, thought this would be *anything*
other than a Jewish reformation movement.

But things had changed by the mid-50s,
20-plus years *after* Jesus' death and resurrection.
The number of Jesus' followers were expanding exponentially,
and were forming communities
not *just* in the heart of Jewish country,
but in towns and cities around the Mediterranean,
even where there *were* no synagogues.
And Gentiles were joining these communities . . . in *droves*.

This set up an intense, and quite predictable, conflict in the church.

The gospel message was that salvation comes by God's grace,
through faith in Jesus,
not by good works, and strict adherence to the law.

So some were teaching, and practicing,
full inclusion of Gentile believers,
without requiring them to become Jews.

No need for males to be circumcised,
which for *thousands* of years,
had been *the* fundamental ritual of the covenant,
the sign of belonging to God and God's people.

But *now*, uncircumcised men,
and women who did *not* follow Jewish law,
were sitting in house churches
right next to devout Jewish believers in Jesus,
eating and drinking the Lord's Supper with them,
with *no restrictions!*

When Jewish believers in Jesus were put in this situation,
it directly challenged everything they *knew*
about what it meant to be Jewish.

Many of them were fine with Gentiles joining the movement,
so long as they also became Jews.

So among the communities in Galatia,
influential teachers went around redefining the Gospel of Jesus,
as something for Jews only.

This conflict absolutely permeates the life of the early church,
and permeates most of the New Testament scripture,
from the book of Acts on.

It certainly permeates the book of Galatians,
and we will revisit it in the coming Sundays.

But today we focus on a few verses in chapter 1,
where Paul reveals *why* he is at the center of this controversy,
why he feels so deeply about this matter,
that it merits an emergency letter
to the Christian communities in Galatia.

It goes back to one fateful day that Paul
was knocked to the ground and struck blind,
as he was on the road to Damascus.

The voice Paul heard, as he lay on the ground stunned,
said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

I have appeared to you for one purpose,
to appoint you to serve and testify on my behalf
to the Gentiles,
so that they may turn from darkness to light."

We often call this Damascus Road encounter
Paul's "conversion".

And it *was* a conversion, no doubt.

Paul's whole point of view was changed.

But on that day, Paul was not "converted to Christianity,"
as much as he was called and grasped by Jesus Christ.

You might even say Paul was grasped and shook by Jesus—
and told, "*You are mine!*

From this point on, you are my servant, to do my bidding."
Seems Paul didn't have much say in the matter.

And Jesus' bidding, as it turned out,

was for Paul to go all over the region of the Mediterranean,
into all the Greek-speaking parts of the Empire,
where Jews were *already* a small, persecuted minority,
and build the church of Jesus Christ
with Jews and Gentiles together,
side-by-side recipients of God's grace.

More than *any other apostle*,

Paul is responsible for the spread of this movement to the Gentiles.

And it began on the day Jesus himself called him,
and held him in a grace grasp.

I use that phrase on purpose.

Because I think it highlights something about God's grace
that's easy to miss.

We easily and quickly spiritualize, personalize, sentimentalize,
what it means to receive God's grace and salvation.

The great theologian Karl Barth, in his writings, asked,
 What does it *really mean*, in concrete and practical terms,
 to be a Christian?
 Barth suggests that the classic answer to that question
 focuses on the benefits we get from our salvation.
 The Christian is a recipient of God's grace,
 and thus enjoys the benefits of reconciliation, of forgiveness,
 of joy, peace, and hope found in Christ.
 There is nothing untrue about that.
 Many of the great hymns we sing spell out the benefits for us.
 Spiritual benefits of salvation are the theme of many sermons.
 The trouble with this classic answer, according to Barth,
 is we are then tempted to assume that enjoying God's gifts
 is the only relevant and important reality
 to which God calls us.
 So *my* salvation, *my* peace, *my* joy,
my assurance of God's blessing,
 become my main concern.
 We are tempted to make Jesus our personal spiritual genie,
 at our beck and call.
 When it's *actually* the *other way around*.
We are at *Jesus'* beck and call.

To receive God's grace-filled invitation to salvation,
 is to be issued a life-altering call.
 It is to be commissioned, forever, as a witness to others.
 We are grasped by the grace of God in Christ,
 and set apart as servants of Christ,
 to be persons who in word and deed
 point to God and to what God is doing in the world.
 Our preoccupation as Christians
 is not the gifts God bestows on individual believers,
 but the service of love to the world
 for which we are grasped, and to which we are called.

Paul's "conversion experience" recorded several times in scripture,
 is a case in point.
 Not *one* of these repeated accounts of Paul's conversion
 mentions *anything* about a new joy, or peace, or sense of security

that resulted from Paul's encounter with Jesus.
Rather, Jesus' revelation of himself to Paul
 resulted in Paul being sent to participate in God's mission.
 Paul was ordered to sign on to God's agenda,
 and leave his own behind.

Paul lays that out quite clearly in today's text from Galatians 1, v. 15-16,
 when he describes his conversion on the Damascus Road:
 He says, quote,
 "God, who had set me apart *before* I was born,
 and called me through his grace,
 was pleased to reveal his Son to me,
 so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles."

Paul was grasped and called by God's grace.
 The picture we get here
 is not the kind of grace that rains down on us
 in gentle showers of blessing,
 although we *can* experience God's grace that way.
 The picture here
 is of God's strong hand of grace that grasps us,
 and turns us,
 reorients us,
 maybe even shakes some sense into us.
 It's the voice of God that says, "*No!* Stop going *that way*.
 You are missing the point.
 This is not about you.
 This is not about what you can accomplish
 through your own raw energy and zeal and devotion."
 As the voice said to Paul, "Stop kicking against the goads.
 Turn around and go *my way*."

That's a bit of a different slant on grace, isn't it?
 We'll talk more about grace and faith in coming weeks,
 but this kind of puts it in perspective.
 God's lavish and unmerited grace
 is not to be confused with sweet sentimentality.
 It is not to be confused with permissiveness,

or blessing whatever we do,
or whatever direction we choose to go.
No, God's grace holds us in a love grasp,
and reorients us,
directs us toward a life of love
and sacrificial service of God.

Maybe that's a new thought to think of grace
as being held in a firm grasp.
Are we saying that God's grace is really
God controlling and manipulating us,
pushing us here and there,
removing our free will?
No, God will *always* allow us
to wriggle free from the grasp if we so choose.
But because of God's strong grace grasp,
we won't be able to *do* that
without some painful consequence.

Because being held in God's grace grasp
is the life that God created us for.
God designed us to have the fullest and richest life
when we give up our own agenda,
and orient ourselves toward God's agenda.

When we live as one held in a grace grasp,
it means our life has both direction and purpose.
We are oriented around a reality much larger than ourselves.
So our life purpose is not dependent on our life circumstances.

We hit a snag in our thinking,
when we look for meaning
in a life that sometimes deals people a lot of garbage.
Life is sometimes downright rude, indiscriminate, senseless.
So where is meaning in life?

When we orient our lives around ourselves
and our needs and our blessings,
we are condemning ourselves to a life of disappointment.
When we attach the meaning of life, to the circumstances of life,

we lose the battle.

But when we orient around something larger
than ourselves or our circumstances,
suddenly God's strong grace grasp
becomes a tremendous gift to us.
Our orientation becomes a faith posture.
Faith doesn't even *try* to make sense out of every tragedy.
Instead, it affirms that the circumstances of life
are part of a large mosaic that we cannot see, but God sees.
It affirms that God is present and active in the places of suffering,
even when we can't perceive it.

The God who calls us and grasps us
is the same God and Father of Jesus Christ,
who suffered and was crucified.
It is the same God who transformed that suffering into glory,
through the resurrection.
God was not detached from suffering on Good Friday,
nor is God detached from human suffering today.
But God's grace grasp orients us toward Easter.
And what a wonderful gift of grace that is.

Being held in a grace grasp is a gift,
in that when I come to realize that it's not my agenda,
nor my responsibility to make everything happen,
I am relieved of a great burden.
I need not struggle with self-doubt,
did I make the right decision back there?
should I have done something differently?
We always make choices that are clouded
with some degree of uncertainty,
maybe even confusion.
But God still holds us in this grasp of love and grace.
But when we realize we are first and foremost
called and grasped by God,
to live our lives in God's service,
it takes the burden off.

When our call and vocation is clear,
we need not even try to be self-reliant.

As the hymn-writer Fred Pratt Green wrote,
How clear is our vocation, Lord,
when once we heed your call:
to live according to your word,
and daily learn, refreshed, restored,
that you are Lord of all,
and will not let us fall.

Let's sing that hymn together, #541.

—*Phil Kniss, June 6, 2010*