

TRUSTING GOD'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Living Letters: Justified by faith in Christ
Galatians 2:15-21; Luke 7:36-8:3; Psalm 32

We know for a fact,
that the reason today's passage from Galatians even exists,
is because of a fight between Peter and Paul.

The epistles we're looking at this summer,
we're calling "Living Letters"
because they carry a message that's still vital for us today.
They're *ancient* letters, of course.
But they were written by real people,
to real church communities,
facing particular opportunities and particular threats.

In these letters, there are lots of theological discussions.
But *behind* almost *every* theological discussion is a story.
Some church was dealing with a specific situation,
that called for careful thinking,
for theological reflection.
Most of the time, we don't know the story,
because Paul and other biblical letter writers don't *tell* us.
But today we know.
We know these verses in chapter 2 of the letter to Galatia
were written because of a fight between Peter and Paul.
Paul *tells* us so.

If you look in your Bibles at Galatians, chapter 2,
you see that this theological treatment
of justification, and faith, and works, and law,
that we read this morning begins in verse 15.
But the four verses right *before* that are a story.
A story about a fight.
Not a physically violent fight, of course.
But a fight nevertheless—
a passionate and deep struggle
between two strong opposing parties.
We only get Paul's side of the story, of course.

We have to make assumptions about the other side.
But it's important that we pay attention to the story,
so we can make more sense out of the *rest* of Galatians.

As Paul tells it, when Peter (also called Cephas) came to Antioch,
they had a face-to-face confrontation.
This would have been *after* the Jerusalem Council, told in Acts 15,
where the church decided to allow Gentiles to join in full communion
without becoming Jews,
without following all the laws that Jewish Christians followed.
So by *this* time, when Paul is writing,
the official position of the church—
the position that (to quote Acts 15)
"seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us"—
was *not* to burden Gentiles with the demands of Jewish law,
but extend to them full fellowship *as Gentiles*.

But, as sometimes is the case,
what looks great in theory, and on paper,
gets complicated when it meets "real-life."
This was *especially* true in Jerusalem,
the mother city of Judaism.
I reminded us last Sunday
that this Jesus movement called "The Way"
started out solidly within Judaism.
It was a Jewish reformation movement.
Until Paul's ministry took it way beyond Judea,
all around the Mediterranean,
all over the Roman Empire,
into every major center of commerce and culture.
So while Gentiles were happily joining together with Jews
in far-flung places like Galatia and Asia Minor,
it was a whole different picture in Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was not *only* Judaism Central,
this was during a period of growing Jewish nationalism,
and growing frustration and anger toward Rome,
and *consequently*, growing anti-Gentile sentiment.
So while James and the apostles in Jerusalem,

were *theoretically* in support of ministry to the Gentiles, this rapid expansion of the church into Gentile territory was creating real problems for them, *and* the home church.

For one thing, in Jerusalem they didn't *have* Gentiles knocking on the door *wanting* to join the church. So it wasn't something they were passionate about, like Paul. They didn't have any real face-to-face experience with this issue.

And secondly, it created a huge image problem for them as followers of Jesus. Not to mention, a huge barrier in their witness to fellow Jews. Already, they were marginalized by the Jewish establishment. Now they had to suffer *even more* by being associated with this renegade Paul. Word traveled fast. Everyone knew Paul was out looking for relationships with Gentiles—staying in their homes, worshiping with them, eating with them. It was distasteful to nearly every Jew in Jerusalem. Jerusalem Christians were trying their best to be respectable full participants in the Jewish community, but Paul was making it awfully difficult.

So what happened in Antioch— and this was just about 100 miles north of Jerusalem, where the ministry to Gentiles really *began*— was that Peter and Paul were both there, and as you might expect they were both enjoying fellowship with Gentile Christians, eating with them, meaning, of course, sharing the common meal, the Lord's Supper. Until some representatives of James and the Jerusalem church came to visit Antioch. So out of deference to the visitors from Jerusalem, Peter withdrew from table fellowship with the Gentiles. In other words, he didn't take communion with them,

so as not to give offense to the mother church.

And Paul, you might say, went ballistic. Jewish piety, when there's an offense, generally calls for private reproof. But Paul took it public, opposing Peter to his face, which meant he considered this both alarming and urgent. Peter probably didn't see this as a big deal. Just took a small symbolic step back to keep the peace. But Paul saw it as a blatant repudiation of the Gospel.

To withdraw from table fellowship with Christians who were culturally and racially different, was to forsake them as his brothers and sisters, make them second-class Christians. It violated the unity of the Church. It mocked the cross of Christ. It challenged the heart of the Gospel.

So Paul challenged Peter, saying, in v. 14: "If you, a Jew, live like a Gentile most of the time, not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

And then today's passage, the theological lesson, begins in the next verse. But *really*, you can still think of this as what Paul is saying to Peter. There weren't quotation marks in early manuscripts, anyway. We have to figure out by the context, where a quote begins and ends. These *might not* be the words Paul spoke to Peter, but they well *could* be.

The words in v. 15 *could* be a general statement. "We ourselves . . ." sounds like an editorial "we." "We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners." But I think the passage *could* just as well read like this: "Peter, you and I are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners. You and I both know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.

And you and I have both 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.”

And v. 18:

“But if I build up again—like *you* did Peter—
the very things that I once tore down,
then I’m acting like a sinner . . . and Christ died for nothing.”

Maybe these *weren’t* the words Paul spoke to Peter,
but these words *were*, without a doubt,
a direct result of this heated conflict between Paul and Peter.

In this letter, Paul appeals to the church in Galatia,
not to let this spirit that Peter demonstrated take over the church,
and nullify the Gospel.

Gentiles and Jews are united by a common faith in Christ.

It is *not* a unity based on common ethnicity,
or on common customs and background,
or even on a common religious legal code,
but a unity based on faith in Jesus Christ.

Or in the words of German theologian Jürgen Moltmann,
the church is not called to an ethnic, social, or legal unity,
but to “an evangelical unity.”

That’s a unity that grows out of a shared trust
in God’s gracious work of salvation in Christ.

So what do you suppose Paul really means,
in this theological argument that says we are
justified only by faith in Christ?
What does “faith in Christ” refer to, exactly?

People use the word “faith” in lots of different ways, of course.
But I think we can have a pretty clear sense
of what *Paul* means by it in Galatians.

I think it’s safe to say that faith is a response to God’s grace,
and that response is characterized primarily by confession.

That is, we confess, or express our faith in, our trust in,
the work of God in Jesus Christ.

We confess, or express our faith with words,
as in, a statement of faith.

We confess, or express our faith with attitudes,
as in having a posture of trust in the work of God.

We confess, or express our faith ethically,
as our trust in God transforms how we live in this world.

But *always*, whether expressed in words or thoughts or deeds,
our faith finds meaning
in the one being confessed—Jesus Christ.
It’s not what we do that gives faith meaning.
It’s the work God has done *through* this one we confess.

I was inspired this week by reading Charles Cousar’s
commentary on Galatians in the *Interpretation* series.
Cousar is a professor emeritus of New Testament
at Columbia Theological Seminary in Georgia.

Cousar wrote,

“Faith is never intended to be a possession people can have
to guarantee their status, like a membership card” (p54)

“Faith is God’s gift which we reappropriate.”

Despite what we like to *think*, faith is *not* something we
muster up, or master, or manipulate.

We don’t have faith so we can put God in debt to us.

We are *tempted* to think that if we can
manage to have sufficient faith,
then God owes us a special blessing,
or that if we just believe,

God will have to take special care of us.

No, that’s just turning faith into a kind of works.

And Paul was adamant in Galatians and elsewhere,
that faith was the *opposite* of works.

Faith is a response to God’s grace *already given*,
it’s not something we muster up to *earn* God’s grace.
Otherwise, Cousar suggests, we just turn faith into the

“ultimate form of self-justification which finally succeeds”
in earning God’s favor.

He says, we make faith like circumcision,
some act that people perform
to gain God’s favor and justification.

But you know,

we can miss the mark on faith in more than one direction.

We can try desperately to earn God’s favor
by jumping through all kinds of hoops,
and *call* it faith.

But that’s just a different kind of works.

Or we can be completely passive,
and thank God we don’t have to be a righteous do-gooder,
and feel compelled to live like we’re out to change the world,
and call *that* faith.

But *that*’s just spiritual laziness.

In fact, it’s one of the seven deadly sins: sloth.

Here’s another quote from Cousar that I think is right on.

“Faith is not a reliance on one’s accomplishments,
or one’s *lack* of accomplishments,
but a trust in the accomplishments of God.”

Faith is a free and generous trust that God does good work.

Or as Cousar put it,

“[Faith is] the sometimes quiet, sometimes reckless confidence
in the goodness and faithfulness of God . . .
Faith is *not* a way for humans to ‘get God on their side.’
[God] is already for them. In faith [*people*] change, not [*God*].
The experience of trusting God always leads
to the thorough reshaping of the believer.”

You see, a full and robust belief in salvation by grace,
through faith in Jesus Christ,
is *by no means* a way to get off easy in this life, ethically speaking.
Trust in God changes us.
Faith reshapes us.
It makes us obedient—

not in a superficial and formalized way,
adhering to the demands of the law for the sake of the law.
Rather, obedience as radical following of the one in whom we trust.
Faith makes us obedient to the one whose mission it is
to move among suffering humanity
carrying good news to the poor
proclaiming release to the captives
healing, restoring, reconciling.
Faith makes us obedient participants in God’s saving story.

It’s the kind of scandalous faith
we heard about in the Gospel reading today.
Where a sinful woman came into a house
and fell at the feet of Jesus weeping,
tears flowing
seeking to be made whole.
She didn’t have to *earn* God’s grace and salvation *first*.
She came *as* a sinner.
But her expression of shameless trust in Jesus to heal and forgive,
in other words, her faith,
resulted in her leaving that house forgiven and transformed,
set on a new path in life.

Being justified by faith is not a free pass to heaven.
The justification, the being made righteous,
is *indeed*, God’s marvelous work, *not* our work.
But faith is our confession of trust in God’s work,
a trust so deep that we forsake all
to follow and obey this one
who forgives us and justifies us.

But we do have to confess.
We confess our trust, and we confess our need, our sin.

So I invite us now to a time of confession and reflection.
I will pray a few lines of confession on all our behalf.
If you can identify with this confession,
do so, in the silence that follows.

Let us pray.

O God, before whose face
we cannot make ourselves righteous
even by being right:
free us from the need to justify ourselves
by our own anxious striving.

O God, before whose face
we are nevertheless called to account:
save us from weak resignation
to the evils we deplore in the world,
and in our own lives.

Give us courage to respond to your grace
with robust faith in your goodness,
with strong trust in your work,
and with a pulsing desire to follow you in obedience,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

[silence]

Hear these words of assurance (Psalm 32):

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Therefore let all who are faithful
offer prayer to you;
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.
You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.
Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
else it will not stay near you.

Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.
Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

—*Phil Kniss, June 13, 2010*