

DO YOU MEAN TO SAY WE ARE WRONG?

10th Sunday in Ordinary Time, c; June 6, 2010

Galatians 1:1–24

Stephen R. Montgomery
Idlewild Presbyterian Church

*Prayer: Eternal and all-encompassing God,
open my mouth and let me bear gladly the warm truth everywhere.
Open our ears that we may hear voices of truth Thou sendest clear.
Open our hearts and let us prepare love with thy children thus to share.
Illumine us, Spirit Divine. Amen.*

(From “Open My Eyes, That I May See” (Hymn No. 324))

Paul usually began his letters to the churches that he had started with such deep appreciation for those who kept things going after he left. “I thank God every time I remember you,” he wrote to the Philippians.” “In our prayers for you we always thank God,” he wrote to the Colossians. To the church at Rome he began, “To all God’s beloved in Rome who are called saints ... First, I thank by God through Jesus Christ for all of you.”

Not so to the Galatians. After the initial greeting, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” he cut to the chase: “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.” You are perverting the very gospel of Jesus Christ, he continued. “If anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you have received, let that one be accursed!”

Now that doesn’t sound all that harsh compared to what we are used to these days on the air waves or political stumps. If the letter would have been written today, it might have read, “You bunch of short-sighted, narrow-minded, thoughtless idiotic ingrates. I come over there to Galatia, not an easy trip, mind you, with all those thorns in my side, and tell you good news about Jesus, and then as soon as I pack up and leave, you start listening to the lies of others, just a bunch of perverts.”

“Why listen to them when you had me? I know first hand what Jesus did for me. I was a sorry person before that, a self-righteous persecutor of followers of Jesus. And I’ve spent three years, count ‘em, three years, spreading the good news. And now you’ve messed up everything I tried to do. You sorry bunch of imbeciles!”

What could have set him off? What in the world was going on in the little church in Galatia? What were they teaching? What was this “other gospel” to which they were turning? There has certainly been a lot of debate about that through the years, and no one knows for sure. But this much is clear: the struggle for the Galatians was between Gospel and law. They had been taught by Paul that God in Jesus Christ redeems us and that therefore there is no other requirement, no other prerequisite for receiving God’s grace. The grace is given freely by God. The life, death, and resurrection of Christ is the evidence of this grace. That’s it. That’s all we need.

But the Galatians had a hard time with that, and were led by someone or someone's to believe something else was needed. That something else was obedience to the law. They did not reject Christ. They simply believed that the grace of God manifested in Christ was not sufficient. They believed that God had done something special in Jesus Christ. But they also believed that they had to *do* something as well if they were to be saved. What they had to do was obey God's law.

I can understand their rationale. It provides a certain degree of security. If my salvation is related to what I do or do not do, then when I do what I am supposed to, I know I've got it made. (And when I see that others aren't doing what they are supposed to do, I can gloat over the fact that they don't have it made!) There is a visible, tangible piece of evidence showing that I'm right with God.

For the Galatians, that one "thing" was obeying the circumcision law. Those who obeyed that law were assured of their relationship with God. And I can just hear the debates going on. "Are you telling me that we have been wrong about this all along? This is what my daddy did, and his daddy, and his daddy. This is a part of our tradition. And you are asking us to give that up?" I can understand their feelings. The world was crumbling around them, and they needed the security that their tradition provided.

That's always been an issue for the church. I know of a church that struggled with this very issue. Not circumcision, but the tension between the freely offered grace of Jesus Christ, and the law, the tradition that tied the community together for generations.

It took place in Macon, Georgia in the 1960's. Talk about the world crumbling around them, the whole country was in an uproar with Vietnam and civil rights marches and women waking up to their God-given gifts and young people finding spectacular ways to be outrageous.

All of this was swirling around a friend's congregation, which included city fathers, who made it clear to their young rector that on Sundays they wanted to rest from the unrest. They wanted to come to church and slip peacefully into the rhythms of the prayer book and then hear an uplifting, well-thought-out sermon about love or something, sing a few rousing hymns, say the old familiar prayers, including "bemoaning their manifold sins," and then they wanted to be done with it and go home.

Newcomers were showing up in church, some in jeans and long hair, a few were even rock musicians. Though the members were not excited about this, to say the least, they were at first gracious as only southerners could be. The newcomers started getting involved in outreach ministries serving the poor, which was sort of okay with the church leaders. But the newcomers also invited the poor and anyone else they came into contact with to come to church on Sunday, which was not okay. They even put an advertisement in the paper with the Sunday service schedule and a picture of a black sheep and the words "Come as you are."

Inviting even more strange people to flock to the church through the newspaper, with the connotation that some of the sheep might be black, was the last straw for the traditionalists. One

women mailed a letter to the entire parish in which she stated that the reach of the outreach people had exceeded the grasp of any sensible person by a long shot.

There was some tension in the church on the Sunday following the publication of that advertisement and the letter. The priest used the lectionary texts for the day in which Jesus reminded the Pharisees of Isaiah's words: "...as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me'.... You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition" (Mark 7:6-8 NRS).

Well, the preacher thought, how providential. He launched, subtly of course, into repenting the traditionalists' sins. He described the parallels between Jesus' day and the world of Macon, Georgia. The congregation was quiet. They seemed transfixed. If the truth be told he was pleased with himself. Then, as he paused for breath, the unthinkable happened.

A lady stood up. Not one of the new casual types who might be standing to applaud the preacher and say "Right on." Oh no, the lady who stood was an old-timer. In fact, she was the one who had written the letter denouncing the newspaper advertisement. It flashed through his mind that she was definitely not standing to applaud and say, "Right on."

Instead, she *talked back*. Instead she said "Do you meant to say were are wrong? Do you mean to say that for all these years we have been wrong?"

The young preacher opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came out. And he stood alone in the pulpit. For a moment, all was silence. And then another voice in the congregation spoke up and then another and then another. And people talked of trying to become a part of the church and being frozen out. And other mourned the loss of respect for traditions held dear. And some yelled in anger and some said they were afraid of what the church and the whole world was coming to. And some cried.

This went on for about 20 minutes. And the young preacher stood in the pulpit and listened. Then for a moment all was silent again. And he said, "I don't know what to do. What shall we do now?"

And someone said, "Well, let's come to the table. Let's have Eucharist."

And they came to the table and partook of the bread and the cup. Every last one of them. And the young preacher said that by the time he got home, he was a changed preacher. Because he never spoke from the pulpit again without remembering that perhaps the gospel would not be heard in his well-chosen words. Perhaps the gospel would be heard instead, by him and everyone else, through the interruption.

And he realized that though there remained differences in that congregation, there were two things that united them. One was fear. But the other was much stronger than fear. It was the grace of Jesus Christ, offered freely without stipulation. The grace offered at the table.

You can probably guess the rest of the story. Like Paul and the Gentiles, the enraged tradition woman became the instrument of reconciliation between the old-timers and the new people. She became the first woman ever on the vestry (this was an Episcopal church), and largely through her advocacy, the first female priest in Georgia came to that congregation. And through the grace of God in her and some others, the doors of that church opened even wider to invite strangers in, and to send people out to love and serve.¹

We come to the table not because we have to, not because it's law; not because God will love us any more, for God's grace is not dependent upon what we do or do not do. In coming to the table, we are given a reminder that you are redeemed. You are loved by God. You are forgiven. God's grace is yours, no strings attached.

Paul gets his share of bad press, some of it deserved. But what he offered the Galatians, he offers to us as well: a Gospel that blesses with a grace powerful enough to forgive and to embrace us all with love. A Gospel which is powerful enough to send people forth to serve: to feed and clothe and work for peace; to teach and to heal and to share our material possessions; all joyfully and gladly, not because our salvation depends upon it, but because God's grace enables it.

What can we do in response to such grace? For our world seems to be crumbling around us as well, with everyone yelling at each other; with birds and fish and human livelihoods dying in oil; with two wars going on and escalated tensions in the middle east; with people without jobs, and Presbyterians will be meeting in Minneapolis next month with no shortage of controversy. What can we do?

Maybe we can just come to the table and have Eucharist. After all, there is room for all.

Amen.

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¹ This story is told by Martha Sterne, "Journal for Preachers," Pentecost, 1997, p. 40-41.

Galatians 1:1–24 NRS

1 Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead— **2** and all the members of God’s family who are with me, To the churches of Galatia: **3** Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, **4** who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, **5** to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen. **6** 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— **7** not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. **8** But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! **9** As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed! **10** Am I now seeking human approval, or God’s approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ. **11** For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; **12** for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. **13** You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. **14** I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. **15** But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased **16** to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, **17** nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus. **18** Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; **19** but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord’s brother. **20** In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! **21** Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, **22** and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; **23** they only heard it said, “The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.” **24** And they glorified God because of me.