

“Christ Lives in Us”
Galatians 2:15-21
Sunday, June 12, 2016
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

Last Sunday I spoke about Paul and his issues with the early church leadership in Jerusalem. Paul starts his letter to the Galatian churches by focusing on his claim to authority. His main purpose seems to be to complain about Peter – with good reason! Peter is making life difficult for Paul. Paul also tells the story of his blinding conversion experience on the road to Damascus, and his ensuing mission to the Gentiles.

Today, we continue in Paul’s letter to the Galatians. In our reading this morning, Paul addresses more directly the controversy over the Law. Who can become full members of Christ’s body, the Church, and who cannot?

I. Which Sinners Are Forgiven?

We are told that, before the Reformation, Martin Luther was in his monk’s cell weeping because of his sins. His confessor, a young man, simply didn’t know what to do, so he began repeating the Apostles’ Creed.

We regularly say the Apostles’ Creed together on Sunday morning. We will be saying the ecumenical version today, #882 in the hymnal. Luther and his confessor would have used the more traditional language. Luther’s young confessor recited:

“ ‘I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; And in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He

rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

“ ‘I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy Catholic Church; the communion of Saints; the forgiveness of sins; the . . .’

“ ‘Wait!’ Luther interrupted his confessor. ‘What did you say?’

“ ‘What do you mean, what did I say?’

“ ‘That last part. What was it again?’

“ ‘Oh, that. I said, ‘I believe in the forgiveness of sins.’

“ ‘The forgiveness of sins,’ Luther said as if savoring each word. ‘The forgiveness of sins. Then there is hope for me somewhere. Then maybe there is a way to God.’ ”

Paul, in his day, is struggling with this question of forgiveness, as well. The Jews of Paul’s time consider all non-Jews to be sinners because they do not keep the Law. Paul asks: Are we as Christians saying that Jesus is an “agent of sin” because he takes us out from under the Law? “Certainly not!” cries Paul. Jesus comes to fulfill the Law and to free us from bondage to it.

Now we need to remember – the Law is not just the 10 Commandments. Most of us know about the 10 Commandments; some of us can probably even recite them. But for the Jews there are actually 613 commandments; 248 of them are Positive (“do this”), and 365 of them are Negative (“don’t do that”).

To Paul’s way of thinking, it’s too much -- to lay this burden on the Gentiles is asking ‘way too much! And, according to Paul, it is not why Jesus came to us. In fact, Paul writes, in perhaps his most important theological statement: “...if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing” (v. 21). Then Christ died for nothing...

By the way, “justification” is a term that refers to God’s judgment of our lives. It brings to mind a court of law. Standing before God, with our lawyers by our side, do we really want to try to justify the lives we have led according to the rules of the 613 Jewish laws? Even if we just went with the 10 Commandments we’d be crazy to attempt it. No one can be saved by the law!

“O foolish Galatians!” Paul continues.

How could they be so foolish as to throw away the gift Jesus has won for them on the cross? They have been crucified with Christ. The old life is dead.

Now Paul is not only talking about dying to the old life of sin. Here he is talking about the old life under the Law, which is ultimately a dead end. On the road to Damascus, blinded by the light of Christ, Paul has seen the truth. The Law can no longer save. Salvation comes only through dying to self, dying to the Law, dying to sin...in other words, salvation comes through Christ -- dying with Christ, being raised again with Christ.

No longer do we have to dot every “I” and cross every “T” of the Law in order to be justified. We only have to accept Jesus, open our hearts to Christ, turn over our lives to his Holy Spirit. His work on the cross justifies us. His work on the cross saves us and earns our forgiveness. There is now nothing we need to do except to receive this great gift and be free!

O foolish Galatians! Why do you turn back to the old ways when Jesus shows you a new and better way?

This is not to say that the Law no longer serves any purpose. The purpose of the Law is a different sermon. (I’ll give you a hint: it has to do with showing us our sin, and convicting us of our need for God).

What Paul affirms here is that salvation is through Christ alone. The Law cannot justify us before God. Paul writes, “...the life I now live...I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved

me and gave himself for me” (v. 20). Wow. That is powerful stuff. Jesus loves you. Jesus gave himself for you.

Jesus loves Paul. Jesus loves Peter. Jesus loves you and me. He loves all of us enough to die for us on the cross. That is overwhelmingly good news. That is an awesome message.

The Jews are forgiven. The Gentiles are forgiven. All are forgiven in Christ.

“O foolish Galatians!” cries Paul. Why would you reject Jesus’ love for you in order to rebuild the back-breaking requirements of the Law?

II. Stop Following Your Shadow.

There’s a fable about a man who lived in the desert. He would wake up every morning and follow his shadow. As the sun moved across the sky from east to west the man essentially walked in a big oval. At sundown he ended up right back where he started. This went on for years. The man walked in circles day after day, following his shadow. One night he heard the voice of God in a dream while he slept. The voice told him to stop following his shadow. Instead, the voice challenged, “Follow the sun, and you will experience life as you have never dreamed it could be.”

The man thought for many days about his vision of God while he continued to walk around in circles in the desert. But one day he mustered up enough courage to break away from his shadow. Little by little, step-by-step, the man began to follow the sun. And he discovered a kingdom that was, until now, far beyond his wildest dreams and imagination. Ultimately, he became friends with the Son (s-o-n). He became friends with Jesus.

“O foolish Galatians!” says Paul. Stop following your shadows! Stop walking around in circles, blind to your newness in Christ, doggedly following the old ways of the Law. Follow the Son. Open your ears to his new ways and to his new Law of love. You have been crucified

with Christ. Leave your old, dead life behind. Claim true life in Christ Jesus.

III. Justification – A Kiss From God.

If the Galatians return to the Law, they are saying that Jesus' work on the cross is not enough. They are saying that their own good works are also required in order to be justified before God. Pride is at work here, and some in Galatia are adamant in their refusal to let go of this pride in their own good works. They look down their noses at the sinners and stand confidently on their keeping of the commandments.

There's a story about the great pianist, Paderewski:

“Paderewski had a friend whose little girl was going to give a piano recital. Out of respect for his friend, Paderewski accepted the girl's invitation to her recital. When she saw the famous pianist in the audience, she got stage fright, forgot her piece, and broke down in tears. At the close of the concert, Paderewski said nothing to her but went up and tenderly kissed her on the forehead and left. If she had not made the mistake and failed, she would not have received a kiss of love and understanding from the master pianist. Likewise, it is when we stumble and fall into sin and are complete failures that the mercy of God in Christ is experienced in terms of forgiveness.” (John R. Brokhoff).

According to Paul, our confidence is not in our own works. Our confidence is not in the Law. Our confidence is in Christ. His work is more than sufficient. And Christ lives in us -- if we claim him as Lord and Savior.

Closing

Ultimately, we are saved by God's grace. This is Paul's message. No one has done less to earn God's grace than Paul, who persecuted the early Christians and sent many of them to their deaths. Yet God forgives Paul and finds a way for Paul to serve the Church.

“Some have noted that grace is like water” says one theologian. “It always flows downhill. It may snow at 29,000 feet at the top of Mount Everest but eventually that moisture flows down to the sea. In the same way grace always goes to the lowest places in our lives. God is seeking the lost to save them, to search for the outcast, to forgive the secret sins which we do not like to recognize or acknowledge. God in Christ is seeking just those sinful, shameful places which we hide from others to reconcile us.” (James D. Kegel)

Paul’s sin is painfully public. There is no way for him to hide his persecution of the Christians, prior to his conversion. But many of us harbor “sinful, shameful places” that we hide from others. Often, we even try to hide these shameful places from ourselves and from God.

But there is no need to hide. Christ has won the victory over sin and death. He has won this victory for us all.

Paul calls us to faith in Christ. It is all that is needed, he says, for justification before God. The Law is useful; it has value and purpose. Good works are an expected outcome of faith. But now that we have been crucified with Christ, we are no longer justified through the Law, but only through faith in Christ. Only by making room for Him in our hearts can we be viewed as righteous. We are not righteous before God except through Christ. No matter how “good” we are, we are not good enough, except if Christ lives in us.

Paul prays and weeps and yearns for the Galatian Christians. He writes to them: “I have been crucified with Christ...it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (v. 20).

May this be true for you. May you have a relationship with the living God, now revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. May Christ live in you. May Christ live in this church family. Amen.