

Sermon by The Reverend Deacon Annie Fritschner

20 June 2010

1 Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a

Psalms 42 and 43

or

Isaiah 65:1-9

Psalms 22:18-27

Galatians 3:23-29

Luke 8:26-39

Who is the church for? Who is allowed in and who isn't? This is the question being raised with the Galatians, and it is the same question Christians are struggling with today.

There once was a man named Paul who walked through the deserts, and rode on ships and camels and mules to spread the true stories of Jesus. Paul started churches in funny out of the way places as well as known trading centers like Philippi, Thessalonica and Corinth. He cajoled, encouraged, admonished, visited - did everything he could do to enlighten the souls of Jews and gentiles and pagans so they might be filled with the Holy Spirit of Christ. And he wrote letters of vision and of practicalities just as a parent would write a child, encouraging these new churches to keep going. He practically wills them into being and growing.

And as he was traveling and writing and praying for these new centers of truth, other religious leaders, known as Judaizers were simultaneously trying to convert folks to the "true" faith of Jesus. And the Judaizers thought that to fulfill the law, one needed to follow certain rituals (including circumcision) in order to become a Jew before one could become a Christian.

Only Paul believed fervently that faith in the resurrected Christ Jesus was all that was necessary for someone to belong to, or as he says, "to be clothed" in Christ. Paul writes so eloquently to his friends in Galatia:

"Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a

disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.”

Paul is emphatic; what matters to Christ—the way to be an heir of the kingdom of God is faith. The color of your skin doesn't matter. Your gender doesn't matter. Who your daddy is or your mama was doesn't count in God's kingdom. God loves each of us eternally and unconditionally - having nothing to do with us. We can't earn it, buy it, co-opt it, nor can we do anything better, more, deeper, faster or newer. The gift comes from God to us without us doing anything. And the us isn't just us, it is US - the wider us. And we do not get to do the choosing; God already has. Paul is describing a church that is wide enough for you and me and all of God's children to gather at the table.

Now this approach to the new Way is pretty radical coming from the man named Paul. In the future - thousands of years later- beautiful cathedrals, dazzling in their style and size and architectural significance will be named after this Holy Man.

But this is the same man who was named Saul, of Tarsus. Remember him? The Jew who proudly despised and persecuted gentiles!

From the Book of Acts 9:1-15 (New American Standard Bible)

¹Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, ²and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

³As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; ⁴and ^{he} fell to

the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

⁵And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, ⁶but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do."

⁷The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.

⁸Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus.

⁹And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord."

¹¹And the Lord said to him, "Get up and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, ¹²and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight."

¹³But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem;

¹⁴and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name."

¹⁵But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel..."

What good and glorious news! Here is a story of us; flawed, pursuing what we think or know to be the truth as we see it, brought to our knees, blinded, so that we can see what God sees; God's love is for all even those who are considered unwanted, unclean, and undesirable.

But through God's grace and love, neither we nor Saul are left in our blindness; we become transformed into the eyes and hearts and hands of God.

We, like Paul, are being made and remade and shaped and reformed by God all the time; our choices, our actions, our thoughts are opportunities for us to respond with loving thankfulness by choosing Christ again and again. As we move closer to Christ, we move the church closer to heaven on earth. As we open ourselves and

offer shalom even when we are hurt or afraid or in need, we are fulfilling our Baptismal covenant to proclaim by word AND example the Good News of God in Christ.

God's church is a people of faith who are seeking and serving Christ in all persons, who are loving their neighbors as themselves, and who are striving for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being.

Let us pray:

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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