

For the people of St. Philip's
June 10, 2007
Proper 2, Year C
Maria Hoecker, preacher
Galatians 1:11-24

This morning, if you will indulge me, I'd like to point our attention on the Epistle reading. While it's tempting for me to reflect on Jesus and widows, I find that I'm drawn into Paul's letter to the Galatians. Not just the verses we hear this morning, but the circumstances that swirl around the entire letter. In particular, there are three words and an exclamation mark at the beginning of chapter three that intrigue me. Paul writes, "You Foolish Galatians!" Paul's characteristic candor comes shining through. It wakes me up.

In this letter, one can't help but notice that there were some major disagreements about serious matters in the earliest churches. Actually, you can't read *any* of Paul's letters without noticing that.

A talented Biblical scholar in our Episcopal church, Sarah Dylan Breuer, brings fresh insight to our Epistle reading this morning. I'd like to share with you a bit of what she has to say about it. I invite you to listen to a bit of history of the early church and see if you think we've changed all that much over the past couple of thousand years.

Usually we think of most of the early church conflicts as ones between Paul, who was right (since he's a saint and all his letters are published), and those other nameless nasty heretics, who were obviously wrong, and probably should not be thought of as being Christian at all.

Well, we can't quite do that with Galatians. In Galatians, St. Paul describes a very bitter fight he's had with none other than St. Peter. As you can imagine, this was a huge deal.

At the point Paul writes to the Galatians, he thinks that Peter is completely wrong -- "self-condemned" and acting in "hypocrisy" in a manner such that others were "led astray" -- and on a matter that is, in Paul's view at least, about the very "truth of the gospel" (Galatians 2:11-14).

So who was the nasty heretic who should have been kicked out of the church, or at least out of all positions of leadership: Peter or Paul? Who is it who is not a real Christian: Peter or Paul?

The answer, I think most people would say--of course-- is neither. Most Christians today would probably say that Peter was wrong on this matter, but he came around. I wonder occasionally whether Peter ever regretted not being a more prolific letter-writer or being more intentional about cultivating a fan base, as Christians don't have any documents from Peter's pen to give his point of view directly. I'd be willing to bet that if we did have Peter's version of the conflict, there'd be some harsh words about Paul's point of view.

It kind of make you wonder:

How can Peter and Paul disagree passionately about something that at least Paul thought was about the very "truth of the gospel," and still we celebrate them both as apostles of Christ and heroes of the faith. In our current climate of the church any serious disagreement about such an important matter of faith would be an occasion to condemn one party as not only completely wrong, but outside the bounds of Christianity itself.

Who might have been pushed out of the first-century communion of churches: Peter or Paul? Whose witness to Christ was expendable? Whose ministry was not needed? And if these are silly questions to ask about Peter and Paul, what makes them any less silly to ask about any of our sisters or brothers today? Peter and Paul fought about dietary laws and circumcision. What do we fight about in the church today?

Paul was right about something in his diatribe to the Galatians. He was right about the dietary laws; he was right that while Jesus himself seems to have kept those laws, it's soooo not about the table laws. As Paul writes to the Galatians, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming the curse for us." (Gal 3:14) In other words, Jesus redeemed us from a self-defeating, cursed legalistic life by absorbing it completely into himself.

Jesus himself fought this battle at every turn on the way to Jerusalem. The Pharisees watched Jesus like hawks circling around their prey. Paul was candidly furious with the hawks of his time for following him into Galatia with their strong arm religious tactics and intimidating the Christians into giving up their free life in Jesus. And as we read in today's letter, Paul was mad at the churches in Galatia for caving in to the unnecessary rules that were outwardly imposed upon them.

When men and women get their hands on religion, one of the first things they do is turn it into an instrument for controlling others. Religious coercion has a long and tedious history of this. Paul started out as one of the Jews who coerced others to obey the law, and then on the road to Damascus he was freed from it all. It forever changed his life and ours, his experience of freedom in Christ. Through Jesus, Paul learned that God was not an impersonal force to be used to make people behave in prescribed ways, rather God --

through Jesus Christ--was a Savior who set us free to live a free life. (The Message : Eugene Peterson. page 1602)

God doesn't coerce us outwardly, God sets us free from within.

Paul was transformed by this liberation in Christ. He went far and wide to tell others, inviting everyone into this free new life. He founded churches in the Roman province of Galatia . A few years later he learned that religious leaders of the old school had come into those churches and called his views and authority into question. They reintroduced the old ways, effectively herding all those freedom-loving Christians back into the corral of religious rules and regulations. This made Paul furious. "You foolish Galatians!" he wrote.

I'll close this morning with a translation of the end of the sixth chapter where Paul closes his letter to the Galatians. This translation comes from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson. The freshness of this modern translation helps me to listen deeply to the Message contained within the Bible .

Now, in these last sentences, I want to emphasize in the bold scrawls of my personal handwriting the immense importance of what I have written to you. These people who are attempting to force the ways of circumcision on you have only one motive: They want an easy way to look good before others, lacking the courage to live by a faith that shares Christ's suffering and death. All their talk about the law is hot air. They themselves don't keep the law! And they are highly selective in the laws they do observe. They only want you to be circumcised so they can boast of their success in recruiting you to their side. That is contemptible!

For my part, I am going to boast about nothing but the Cross of our Master, Jesus Christ. Because of the Cross, I have been crucified in relation to the world, set free from the stifling atmosphere of pleasing others and fitting into the little patterns they dictate. Can't you see the central issue in all this? It is not what you and I do-- whether we submit to circumcision , or reject circumcision. It is what God is doing, and he is creating something totally new, a free life! All who walk by this standard are the true Israel of God--his chosen people. Peace and mercy on them!

Quite frankly, I don't want to be bothered anymore by these disputes. I have far more important things to do--the serious living of this faith. I bear in my body scars from my service to Jesus.

May what our Master Jesus Christ gives freely , be deeply and personally yours, my friends. Oh yes! Deeply and personally yours.

(The Message--Eugene Peterson, page 1610. --- trans. of Galatians 6:11-18.)

Amen.