

June 5, 2016

Galatians 1:11-24 “Toxic Faith”

So this passage Barbara read is from Paul’s letter to the churches in the region of Galatia. Most scholars say it was written around the year 49 or 50 in the Common Era which makes it one of the earliest books in the New Testament. You’ve got to give Paul credit, his writings generate all sorts of ... *discussion*. When you’re talking about the number of books in the New Testament that were written by a given author, he wins the prize. He covered a lot of territory in his journeys too. He was loved and hated, revered and reviled, welcomed and kicked out of more places than you can shake a stick at. That can probably be said for a lot of the apostles too. But we get to see Paul’s journey up close and personal because we have his letters right here ... and some of his best stuff was written when he was in jail for just doing what he was called to do ... and that’s carrying out Jesus’ mission and ministry while preaching the good news about the coming of God’s reign on earth.

But here’s one of the problems with Paul ... he *wasn’t* one of the 12 apostles who were with Jesus during his earthly ministry. Paul wasn’t there when Jesus was healing people out in the Judean outback. He wasn’t there when Jesus made his last triumphal entry into Jerusalem to confront the combined power of Caesar’s Empire and Herod’s “church.” He wasn’t there for the last supper. He wasn’t there when Jesus was betrayed, tried, tortured, and crucified. He wasn’t there to witness the empty tomb. He wasn’t there when Jesus appeared to the apostles and commissioned them to “go into all the world.” He wasn’t there on the day of Pentecost when tongues of fire fell on the crowd. He wasn’t there to hear Peter preach that first sermon on the day the church of the Risen Christ was born. Now ... with that in mind ... can you understand how this guy must have struggled when it came to convincing folks that he had the same authority as the rest of the apostles?

Granted, this guy’s got a *great* testimony. He’s walking down the main highway between Jerusalem and Damascus, encounters the risen Christ,

is stricken blind, regains his sight in the house of a prominent church leader, and launches one of the most successful and prolific mission outreaches *ever*. But still. What's that song we sing in the church sometimes? "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" "Well no ... but I *am* an apostle!" And the funny thing about this passage is the well from which he draws his credentials. Right off the bat he hits them with, "I received my calling directly from Jesus," ... as you would *expect* him to. Good call. But rather than talking about what a great guy he is *now* ... rather than talking about what he's done that's benefited the church lately, he launches into what kind of a person he was *before* his encounter with Christ. And let me tell you, the things he did before his encounter with Christ weren't the sort of things you'd put on a resume today if you were looking for a job in the church. "Yeah, I basically persecuted Christians. Violently too I might add." And why did he violently persecute Christians? Verse fourteen ... because of his *zealous devotion to the tradition of his ancestors*.

Now here's something we've got to be careful about when we approach the New Testament. We've got to make sure that we're not making *villains* out of folks who practice traditional Judaism. When we read about Jesus' trial before the Jewish Court prior to his crucifixion, or when we read about how the Scribes, the Pharisees and the Sadducees were always up in Jesus' face about his understanding of the Law and vice-versa, or when we read about how King Herod sent his men out to kill every firstborn baby in the land, we're tempted to think, "Can you believe those awful Jews?" And this has happened throughout history you know ... we just watched a movie Wednesday at the Congregational Church about how this horrible anti-Semitism in the German church fueled the Nazi's campaign against the Jews during World War II, and how a lot of churches and theologians were standing right there with the Nazi Party fanning the flames. Let me make this clear for the record: There is *nothing wrong* with traditional Judaism! Jesus himself was a practicing Torah-observant Jew! But here's the thing – The problem isn't so much with the religion itself as it is with the *ones who practice the religion*. Or maybe I should say, "Those who practice it poorly."

Which might be why Paul gives the Christians in Galatia this awkward ... and quite frankly *backward* resume. “Yup. I was a *bad* man. Couldn’t get any worse than me! I am responsible for some of the calamity you’re facing *right now* as followers of Jesus.” Here’s the thing though ... maybe Paul is owning up to his own history of religious violence so that he can compare it with the *new* life that he now lives in Christ! So it’s more like, “I *am* an apostle ... not because I was there with Jesus when he walked the earth ... I’m an apostle because the *risen Christ changed me*. The Risen Christ transformed me at such a fundamental level that it is “no longer I who lives, but Christ who lives in me.” Which is a phrase borrowed from next week’s text from Galatians 2, so consider that a sneak preview for next week’s sermon.

When a person’s religion or religious convictions lead them to act out violently toward another person, something is wrong. Something is toxic. Faith is meant to be uplifting, enlightening, edifying, and life affirming. And don’t get me wrong ... religious zeal isn’t bad. Enthusiasm and rock-solid core values are good things. But Paul’s “enthusiasm” for his life as a Pharisee mutated which created an idol ... a false god of violence and vengeance. And you know what the Law says about serving or worshipping false idols. It’s forbidden! It’s one of the “big ten” that’s foundational to what we call “the Law of Moses.” Paul believed very much in the Law of Moses. He affirmed the truth of Moses’ Law, and saw himself as a guardian of that truth ... nothing should ever get in the way of that truth ... and in fact if anything looks like it challenges that truth, or at least the way I see and understand that truth, then it must be confronted and eliminated! And thus the idol is created. Our passion for God’s truth can turn that very truth into an idol in whose name we are willing to hate and attack and destroy others. But the change for Paul comes when Jesus himself confronts him on that road to Damascus and identifies himself with the victims of Paul’s zealous quest. Jesus is not just siding with the victims because they were his followers, but also because they were victims - victims, like himself, of religious zeal turned to violence. Victims of those whose faith has

gone toxic.

And Paul makes it clear in this passage that his new understanding of God wasn't just cooked up by a clever religious teacher ... it was revealed by God in the revealing of Jesus the Risen Christ. So again, when we consider how Jesus himself died at the hands of those whose faith turned toxic ... we see right away that God never identifies with the perpetrators of religious violence. God is never on the side of those who perpetrate religious violence. In fact, God identifies with the victims of religious violence, which in this case is Jesus. We dedicated our wall of crosses a couple of weeks ago over in the fireside room, and talked a little about how the cross conjures up so many different images for people ... and how it has different meanings for different folks. For the Romans, the cross was a symbol of terror. It was Rome's way of saying, "this is what happens to dissenters." This is what happens to the enemies of Rome. Yet it was on the cross that Jesus breathed words of forgiveness for those who opposed the Reign he represented. That's so backwards isn't it? At least in the way of the empires of the earth. The cross gets transformed from a symbol of terror to a symbol of forgiveness. How weird is that?

And, Paul is saying, this revelation of the God in whom there is no violence is also the call of God to us. Despite the way some English Bibles translate it, Paul doesn't actually say that "God revealed his Son to me," but that "God revealed his Son *in* me." We are called to embody the message, to be the ones in whom the gracious truth of Jesus Christ is revealed and seen. To do anything else would be toxic.

And now we are invited ... again ... to this table. We'll hear once again the words of grace and the offer of life. Here we are again graciously offered Christ's own brokenness, that we might be lifted into his wholeness and strengthened for living out his grace for the week ahead. Here our failures are not counted against us. Because even as Christ identifies himself as the victim of our bitterness and hostility, he welcomes us with open arms and wounded hands and invites us to feast

on his love that we might be raised from death to life. Here is life,
revealed in Christ crucified, and offered that we might be saved and live.