

June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2022

### **Galatians 3:23 – 29 “All Dressed Up and Ready to Go”**

Okay, this is the last week that we’ll be talking about the Apostle Paul. At least as far as following the lectionary goes. He might show up a time or two when I go off lectionary for the next couple of months, but who knows. Let’s do one last re-cap of Paul’s ministry for anyone who needs to get caught up. Paul is a Roman citizen who also happens to be a Jew in the Pharisee tradition. At one time, he went by his given name, Saul, and it was his job to persecute Christians with the hopes that this whole “Jesus Movement” would just go away. He was present when an angry mob stoned the Apostle Stephen to death and from there he went about his business until one day when he encountered the risen Christ on his way to Damascus. This left him blinded for a few days, but by the time his vision cleared, he received a new name and a new purpose. He was no longer Saul the persecutor of Christians. He was now Paul the Apostle of Christ. He preached all up and down the northern territories of the Roman Empire overseeing churches and helping establish new ones. He was bold, fearless, had a flair for the dramatic and spent a lot of time in jail because of this. He wrote letters to the churches in that region and the ones we have are part of our holy scriptures. We call his letters “The Epistles,” and today we’re reading his Epistle to the Church in the region of Galatia which is modern day Turkey.

Along with the book of 1 Thessalonians, Galatians is the oldest book in the New Testament which seems strange because you’d think it would be one of the gospels since that’s where the *story* of Jesus begins. But what we have here in these letters is the foundation for what we believe as Christians and how we express our faith in action. The first issue that the early church had to deal with related to whether one had to convert to Judaism in order to follow Jesus. The answer, according to Peter, Paul and the rest of the apostles was a firm “no,” but try telling people who could trace their lineage back to Abraham that any Joe-Blow Gentile could just say he or she believed that Jesus was the Messiah

when they didn't have a handle on what "Messiah" even meant! Consequently, the apostles had to spend a *lot* of time and effort convincing these die-hard Jews that Jesus came for all and, "all means all."

And that's where we find ourselves here in Galatians today. Step number one in convincing these die-hard Jews that all means all was getting them to re-examine their understanding of the Law of Moses. Even to this day, the vast majority of Jews are Jews by birth. One does not simply "convert" to Judaism. If you want to become part of a worshipping Jewish community, you have to submit to the Law of Moses and all its requirements. And there are a *lot* of requirements especially as it relates to dietary laws, ritual purification, Sabbath observance and other day-to-day changes in lifestyle. But the gospel of Jesus is *compelling*. It begs for a response from the one receiving the good news. I imagine there were plenty of non-Jewish people who were so moved by the gospel they said, "Listen, just tell me what I need to do and I'll do it." And then the subject of circumcision came up. "Now wait ... what? Really? Whoooo. That's a *lot* to ask. Can we negotiate a little bit on this?"

Thankfully Paul came on to the scene to say, "Okay, let's talk about the difference between the *letter* of the Law and the *spirit* of the Law." As a practicing, Torah-observant Jew, Paul could confidently say, "The Law is God's will, and the Law is good." No doubt. The problem with the Law is that it is only able to *convict*. The Law makes us aware of our sinfulness. And if that's all the Law does, it doesn't take much for us to become prisoners of the Law. If you rely on trying to follow the Law, you will *always* fall short. The Wesley Study Bible offers a great explanation of this concept in the notes for this passage – The writer says, "The purpose of the law was to deal with transgressions by making them explicitly known as violations against God. Moreover, the law could not make its adherents righteous; instead it confined them to sin. This all changed when Christ came and righteousness by faith was

established. Now that Christ and the new era had arrived, there was no reason to remain under the law and its method of dealing with sin.”

Well that just explains everything and makes it all better, right? And everyone agreed, circled up, held hands and sang “Lean on Me.” No. The Galatians were human beings. We are human beings. And we human beings always want to complicate matters ... especially matters that have to do with determining whether someone who we may not agree with or even like can be a part of our circle. We want to make sure that our barriers remain firm. And we have a hard time believing that God rarely shares *our* views about who gets to come in and who has to stay out. Ever notice that it’s often the “hard-core religious” who are most adamant about protecting those kinds of barriers? Jesus commands us to love one another. He even takes it a step further and says, “You must love your neighbor as yourself.” And just in case somebody wants to split hairs over who our neighbor is, Jesus gives us the parable of the Good Samaritan and says our neighbor is *everyone*. Even people we don’t like. But we say, “Well, he couldn’t have meant that. That’s preposterous. What he *really* meant was ...” insert embedded prejudicial justification here. That’s what the church struggled with in the first 100 years of its existence. The ones who were immersed in old-school rabbinic Judaism said, “Okay, sure, you may *say* that Christ made us righteous by faith alone, but what does that *really* mean? Because surely it doesn’t mean *anyone* can be made righteous by faith. That’s not hard-core enough. That’s how you tell whether something is from God or not. If it’s not hard-core enough, we are clearly misunderstanding something. Because God doesn’t let anyone off easy. There’s got to be something more. Something we’re just not fully understanding. I mean, the Law makes it clear that the Jewish people, are God’s chosen ones. We know this because the Law tells us so. We’ve been taught this for generations. And here comes this fake apostle Paul who is barely ‘one of us’ telling us that we’re ‘justified by faith’ whatever that means?”

Well, Paul is pretty clear about what that means. If we understand that we are justified by faith, we are children of God. And when we

recognize that we are children of God and *act on it through our baptism*, it's like getting a new set of clothes. We are all dressed up and ready to proclaim the good news, and the good news is that because of Christ, there is no longer any distinction between Jew and Gentile, slave or free, or even male or female. We are all one in and through Christ. Paul is saying that through faith, the whole human race *becomes* God's chosen people ... God's children and God's heirs.

That is good news for a *lot* of people. Especially for those who've been left out since birth and made to feel that there is no way they can ever be a child of God. If we're honest with ourselves, we would have to admit that we've taken Paul's radical overturning of this tired old system of privilege and discrimination and we've turned it into a whole *new* way of looking down on others. That's when we turn our Christian faith into an exclusive mark of superiority over all "non-believers." But it would seem to me that the God who created all things and all people, the God who called Abraham and Sarah and their descendants for the benefit of all people, and the God who in Jesus Christ came into this world to redeem all people, is the God who has chosen to love the *whole* human family. Truly, in and because of Christ Jesus, we are all chosen to be one in Christ Jesus. We are all beloved children of God.

We need to be reminded of this. Often. Let's practice. Repeat after me.

I am

A child of God

*I am*

A child of God

It doesn't matter if I'm white or black or a lovely shade of brown

*I am* a child of God.

Through Christ

We are God's children by faith

We are Abraham's offering

We are heirs according to God's promise.

Clothed in Christ's glory

I am  
A child of God.

There. That wasn't so hard was it? Well ... maybe it was kind of hard. Maybe it's hard to think that it's our faith that justifies us. That we are no longer prisoners of *any* law. Don't get me wrong, the Law is good. But it is incomplete without God's gift of love. But again, many believe that's not hard-core enough to be true. Like the Galatians, we are fallible human beings. We *all* fall short of God's glory. Wait, do you mean those of us in the church ... those of us in *this* church? Yes. We are the church. And the church is not made up of perfect people. But through Christ we are gradually and sometimes slowly being perfected. And that's okay. As the old preacher once said,

I think that I shall never see  
A church that's all it ought to be;  
A church that has no empty pews,  
Whose preacher never has the  
blues;  
A church whose deacons always "deke,"  
And none is proud but all  
are meek;  
Where gossips never peddle lies  
Or make complaints or criticize;  
Where all are always sweet and kind  
And all to other's faults are  
blind.  
Such perfect churches there may be,  
But none of them are known  
to me. But still we'll work, and pray and plan  
To make our church  
the best we can!  
If you could find the perfect church,  
Without one fault or smear,  
For goodness sake, don't join that church -  
You'd spoil the atmosphere.  
If you should find the perfect church,  
Then don't you ever dare  
To tread upon such holy ground -  
You'd be a misfit there.

But since no perfect church exists, made of imperfect men (and women),  
Then let's cease looking for that church and love the one we're in.  
Of course it's not a perfect church - that's simple to discern -  
But you and I and all of us could cause the tide to turn.

Let us clothe ourselves in Christ, turn the tide and proclaim the good news that we are children of God.