

Proper 4, Year C, 2016

1 Kings 18:20-21, 30-39, Psalm 96, Galatians 1:1-12, Luke 7:1-10

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

It is safe to say that, after Jesus, the apostle Paul had the most impact on Christianity. Fourteen of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament are written by or attributed to him. His zeal in persecuting the early church is only exceeded by his zeal in spreading the Gospel. He founded many of the faith communities of the early Jesus movement. Most of these communities were among the gentiles. Some have even accused Paul of taking the religion of Jesus and making it into the religion about Jesus.

I can only speak for myself, but my relationship with Paul and his writings have been troubled, at best. Paul's writings have been used in the past for horrible purposes. They have been used to uphold slavery, barred women from ordained ministry, and claim to that HIV and AIDS are God's punishment. I have had my fair share of Paul quoted at me.

But, my understanding of Paul changed dramatically, one afternoon, while reading 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians. Or, if you prefer, Two Corinthians. While reading that letter, addressed to a community in turmoil, a community that he founded, it hit me: Paul is a pastor who cares, who deeply cares, about his flocks. He cares about the people whom he has left behind. And, because he loves them so deeply, his writings tend to take on a very emotional tone.

That moment changed my view of Paul and of his writing. And, I'm glad. In today's epistle, Paul is at his absolute best and his absolute worst.

Paul is writing to churches located in Galatia, which is modern day central Asia Minor. He founded those communities, preached the word, and moved on. After moving on, he hears that others are preaching a different

gospel, one that is leading the Galatians astray. And he launches directly into this controversy head on. Paul is angry. It seems that he is defending his ministry. He's not. It's the Gospel he is proclaiming and defending, not himself.

It is important for us to remember the early Church was figuring out things as it grew. Paul's letter to the Church in Galatia is thought to be written within one generation of Jesus' death. It precedes any of the written Gospels. There was no New Testament to draw on. There was no copy of Summa Theologica to pull from a shelf. There wasn't even a creed to use. I would like to think that these were all good meaning and well intentioned folks, trying their best to understand this man from Nazareth, this Jesus.

Galatians addresses this new teaching, this new Gospel, head on. This new teaching to which Paul so strenuously objects states that, in order to follow Jesus, who is Jewish, one must first convert to Judaism. There were people who sought to convert the early gentile followers of the Way to Judaism so that they may truly follow Christ. Now, for people born and raised as Jews, this would not be an issue. However, for a grown man, there might be an issue. In practical terms, it is called circumcision.

That is the practical problem with this "new" teaching. It may put a crimp, no pun intended, on evangelism. But Paul makes a greater theological point. As Paul writes later in this letter: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself in Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all are you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise." (Gal. 3:27-29). We heard an echo of this last week when Tyler and Spencer were baptized: You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.

For Paul, baptism through and belief in Christ is enough. It allows anyone, no exceptions, to have a relationship with God. It is a radical new understanding of our relationship with God. No longer is this great redeeming and creator God a tribal God for the nation of Israel; this transcendent God, this God who created the world simply by speaking, this God is for everyone.

This radical openness to God is there in today's Gospel reading. Most of us want to focus on the centurion's statement of faith and his actions. We probably have heard sermons that tell us to be like the centurion: be humble and faithful to God, and God will provide. I'm not disagreeing with that theology. But, when we look at this meeting in context, Jesus' words become even more powerful.

This encounter with the centurion follows some of Jesus' famous teachings. He has just delivered the Sermon on the Plain. He has offered the Beatitudes and he has told his followers to love their enemies. And he goes further. He tells them not to judge but to forgive and to forgive extravagantly.

And this brings us to the centurion. The centurion is a man of faith. He loves the Jewish people. He even built them a synagogue. He is so well liked that members of the synagogue approach Jesus on his behalf. As Jesus travels to the centurion's house to heal the servant, the centurion sends friends to tell Jesus that he does not need to come, but to simply say the words, and his servant will be healed. Why? Because the centurion is a man of authority and power, and if he tells a man to move, he moves. If he tells a man to go, he goes. If he can make this happen by simply saying a word, how much more can Jesus do? Jesus turns to the crowd and says, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."

These words don't seem to revolutionary. They don't, until we remember when Luke's Gospel was written. It is dated by many scholars from the 80's the early 90's. By then, the temple, the central point of Jewish worship, the very house of Yahweh, has been destroyed by the Romans. We tend to think of the Pax Romana, the peace of the Roman Empire, when reading about Rome. But Rome could be vicious when it dealt with uprisings. And it was exceptionally vicious in the Jewish War of 66 AD to 70 AD. Most likely, the hearers of this Gospel would have anger and distrust for the Romans. After all, it is only 20 years since the Temple was destroyed. The American Civil War was fought over 150 years ago, and there are members of my family who still do not like Yankees. And, here is Jesus, praising a centurion. Praising a symbol of the tyranny of Rome. Praising an emblem of the boot pressed against the throat of Israel. Praising a member of the Kingdom of God.

Paul and Jesus are both preaching God's grace. There is something fantastic about God's grace: there is enough for all of us with oceans to spare. It is not God who limits that grace. It's us. We limit God's grace. When we make someone else the "other", when we deem someone as having a lower standing than us because of their job, or education (or lack thereof), or their race, or their gender, when we claim redemption for ourselves but withhold it from others, when we think we are unworthy of God's love, we limit God's grace from working in our lives. We block the sunlight of the Spirit from shining through.

There are those that would like to draw their circles just wide enough for them and the good people. Major political candidates hold a blue print for a wall in one hand and a bible in the other. We have clerks of courts who, having received God's grace to remove their sins, claim that same grace calls them to refuse to offer marriage licenses to same-gender couples.

Jesus' and Paul's words continue to challenge us today. We are to draw our circles larger and larger, so that no one is left outside. For in Kingdom of God, no one is left out. No one is outside. No one is discarded.

One of the unexpected joys of servant ministry is that we get to know people that we serve. What starts as our attempt to change their world can actually result in them changing our worlds. We get to know the poor, the marginalized, the discarded, not as categories, but as people, by name. We hear their stories and their challenges, their hopes and dreams. And then we realize that they are us, and we are them. We are transformed by our work, by their lives, by the Gospel.

You may have noticed that I am now offering the invitation to confession. This is not simply so that the deacon has more to do in the liturgy. The Prayer Book layers theological meaning by having the deacon invite us to confession. The same deacon who proclaims the Gospel and dismisses us to live out the Gospel out there, in real time and in real life, is the same deacon who calls us to repent for missing the mark, for falling short to incarnate the Gospel in our lives. And, then, having received assurance of God's absolution and the Bread of life for our journey, we are dismissed into the world, to try again.

At the end of today's service, you will be dismissed, to go in peace, to love and to serve the Lord. You will be told to live into the Gospel of Jesus, a gospel that is open to everyone, no exceptions. And, then, when we fall short, and we will, we can return to God, for absolution and rest and nourishment, before we are sent out to try again. And again. And again. This great loving God we serve gives everyone, *everyone*, unlimited chances to live into His Kingdom.

That's God's grace. That's the message of the Gospel. That is the Good News. Amen.