

20 June 2010

Sunday 12C

Sermon notes:

Galatians 2.1-14 OFF RCL

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[Edited transcript from recording]

I'll begin this morning with an acknowledgement or a confession that there is no printed version of the sermon available today. The reason can be attributed to a couple of things. Certainly this reading has given me much more trouble in this last week than readings have for a long time. That can be partly attributed to the fact that Coulton has been rather unwell and I haven't had a full night's sleep for over a week, so not thinking particularly clearly is one factor. But there is also in the book of Galatians an extraordinary complexity of ideas through which Paul is working through in the space of these four or five pages. There are ideas of forgiveness and sin, freedom and grace, responsibility, matters of ethics, basic questions of how we are properly related to God; and I have found it very hard to tease those out in a way that would make sense to someone who is going to hear what I am about to say.

I was reminded of being back ten or twelve years ago as I was trying to finish off my doctoral dissertation. The last four or five months were the most difficult until I realized that I had the chapters in the wrong order(!), and then it all dropped into place. But with all those thousands and thousands of words in front of me I couldn't work out why I couldn't make it work, and I think there is a sense in which now with Galatians I haven't quite got the "chapters" in order, and so I will offer you a prelude perhaps to next week's sermon this morning.

Martin Luther in the 16th Century wrote a commentary on the book of Galatians which ran to nearly six hundred pages. Someone has said that his book is not so much a commentary as a rewriting of Galatians for his time. It probably indicates something that it takes six hundred pages to make sense of what Galatians might say to us in our time. I have only one page in front of me here this morning in case you are worried about how we are going to work through this, but perhaps we do need someone today who will do the same kind of work. For what Paul is working on here in the book of Galatians is the kind of thing that we need to hear again in the churches today.

Now the focus of his debate is the question of circumcision, which has to do with the entry of uncircumcised Gentiles – men of course – into the church which begins, of course, as a Jewish faith in God. We heard this morning of how Paul gave an account of the way in which the apostles had agreed that circumcision did *not* matter for participation in the church. Yet at a later date Peter comes to Antioch and because some people sent from Jerusalem seem to frighten him back into being "Jewish" again, he withdraws from table fellowship with the Gentiles. Paul points out the hypocrisy in that. For us of course today circumcision is a non-problem, at least as a religious question. For us it is more a medical or an ethical question when it does come up at all. So in a sense we might say "we understand all of that" – that is, what Paul is on about. We no longer bother with circumcision as a ritual for entering into faith in Christ. But we haven't necessarily dealt with the problem Paul's dealing with, just by getting rid of the way it manifested itself in Paul's time, and there are two questions which I think are probably important to help us get into what's going on here.

The first is, why on earth would the Galatians' change their mind? Paul had insisted in his proclamation of the gospel that there is no need for circumcision. Who on earth would therefore choose it if someone told you it was not necessary? Paul was charged sometimes with making faith in Christ easy and this charge probably had something to do with the question of circumcision. So why would the Galatians' choose something that was harder, certainly as a physical assault, and so harder to go with than the less painful justification by grace through faith as Paul preached. Of course, they may have been persuaded by the Jews who came from Jerusalem and come to question Paul's teaching. They may firmly have believed that the Jews were right, or they may just have thought it is best "just in case" to do this: *just in case* Christ is not enough, we will also take on the mark of the Covenant. But Paul's argument is that as soon as you go with the "just in case" approach to circumcision, you have declared in fact that you do not believe that Christ is enough, for it *is* very hard to live by grace. It is very hard not to bear on your body or in your person, in your reputation, in your history, some sign that makes you righteous *before someone else*.

The second question is, why did the Judaizers (those who want to make the Gentiles more Jewish) bother in the first place? What interest did they have? It's a much more interesting and telling question. We can say, charitably, that they had a concern for the Galatians. They really believed that in order to be fully saved the Gentiles needed to have the mark of circumcision. But it is worth seeing what the mark of circumcision does which Paul's argument doesn't.

What it does is it makes *everybody the same*. It makes the newcomers like us. So they might be arguing that they want the Galatians to be saved. But they have a benefit themselves, because if the Galatians, if the *Gentiles*, look the same as us, then *that affirms us also*. When they are different it casts a question mark over us. Are we righteous if they are righteous? So much the better if we all believe in Christ and all have in ourselves the mark of circumcision. It is at that point – the question of homogeneity, of everyone being the same – that I think we might be starting to feel what Paul is getting at here for ourselves today. For, of course, circumcision is *not* our issue. Anybody who said we have to be circumcised to be part of the church today will be laughed out of the church.

But we do make other demands of others and of ourselves which function in the same kind of way. We are as a denomination a fairly anxious church. I have recently been overseeing a committee for the placement of a minister in another congregation. Mercifully we have just about finished that process I think! But it is interesting just listening to the way the congregational members themselves speak about what it is they desire for themselves as a church. And it is something I have heard over and over again both in our own congregations and a whole range of other congregations about the place. We know we are under pressure, we can feel it in the diminishing numbers and the sense that we don't have enough money, but more importantly that we don't have enough *people* just to "do the work". And so when we think about people joining the church, we tend to think about people who will come and *help* us "do the work", by which we mean go on the rosters, and go on the committees, and so *become like us* and subscribe to a way of being a church which, of course, is *our way* of being a church. This is not just in the congregation; it is so also at Presbytery level and Synod level. The same kind of question, the same kind of anxiety being expressed: how will we *maintain* the whole thing? And so the outcome of our church growth programs – to the extent that we have them – is not that people might come and be free in faith in Christ, but that they might come and be like us, a kind of modern version of circumcision – putting your name on the roster.

Yet Paul insists on the importance of *difference*. He says that what we have in common is not the mark, not the same kind of external righteousness which we identify (or not) in one person after the other. What we have is a call to a common humanity, to a new type of freedom. For the Judaizers – those Jewish Christians who wanted everybody to be the same – the fact that the Gentiles were different called them to reassess how they understood themselves, in that they also no longer stood before God as

Jews, but stood before God in Christ, as did the Gentiles. It feels by comparison to be very shaky ground.

Now just to shift gear slightly, as I was wrestling with this last night, I took a break and wandered down the other end of the house and looked in upon the extraordinary creature who sleeps in the bedroom next to us – or *half the time* sleeps in the bedroom next to us, and the other half tends to end up where we are – and there came to mind the expression "exasperating joy", a contradiction in terms of course, but a very important one which I think might give us a bit of an insight into what it is that Paul was wrestling towards here. For a child is exasperating because he is not like me and he wants different things from me, and he demands things of me and calls me to be something else other than what I might have chosen to be by myself; there is exasperation in that.

But in fact I have discovered there is also joy because he is not like me, and he demands things of me and he requires me to be something else other than what I might have chosen to be by myself and so I am expanded.

The Gentiles as Gentiles were exasperating for the Jews, and the emphasis fell upon the exasperation, but Paul says to them they are your brothers and your sisters, let the emphasis fall upon joy.

Let the emphasis fall upon joy. For the gospel is that the God who can raise the dead can find more joy than exasperation in the people who live around us. There is more freedom than binding to be found in the people around us. Out of what we might fear we are going to lose, there is a promise; there will be yet more to gain.

Out of death there will be life. Paul says to the Galatians, and at the same time though not directly addressed here, he also says to the Judaizers – everything has changed, and it is going to be okay.

That is the Gospel.