

Galatians 3:1-9, 23-29

We continue with our sequential reading of Paul's letter to the Galatians. Last week's reading was strongly focussed on faith/faithfulness and the fact that people are brought into right relationship with God by trusting the One who was utterly faithful. This week we move to a consideration of how this happens, especially for Gentiles who had not even imagined themselves as called by God into relationship with God and each other.

Now the Galatians did not actually see Jesus being crucified. After all, Paul's letters were written fifty to sixty years after the event. The preaching the Galatians first heard from Paul vividly described the death of Jesus Christ by crucifixion. So why is the vivid description of Christ's death an argument for the truth of the gospel that Paul preached? The answer has to do with Jewish apocalyptic expectations, expectations that Paul saw fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Like other Jews of his time, Paul believed that a general resurrection of the righteous would be a feature of the End, that time when God vindicated the righteous and punished the wicked. The public exhibition of Christ as crucified made it crystal clear to the Galatians that Jesus Christ was "really most sincerely dead." And the activity of the Spirit of God's Son among the Galatians, responsible for miracles in their midst, confirmed Christ's new life. "Christ is risen indeed!" Christ's resurrection signalled the beginning of the End, with Christ as the first fruits of a whole new age - a new creation.

Another feature of the new age is that the Gentiles will come to understand that the God of Israel is Lord of all. Just as the new age is dawning, when Gentiles like those in the churches of Galatia recognize the one who is the God of both Abraham and Jesus to be their God as well, the new teachers preaching to the Galatians want to roll back time to an age when the resurrection had not happened, when the gentiles were separate from the Jews, and when works of the law – not the working of the Spirit – enacted the will of God in the world.

Conflict lines have been drawn in the sand and it's causing fracturing within the faith family about what it means to be right with God. Some are teaching that to be made right with God you must still observe the old covenant. This is taking away from the simple truth and good news that being made right only involves having faith in the crucified Jesus and believing that He paid the price for our life on the cross so we would not have to. Our works don't lead to us being made right with God, rather our being made right with God, leads to our good works.

Paul reminds the Galatians that Christ, having been crucified, is risen: his Spirit's work among them testifies to his risen life. Paul wants to know, is any of what they are experiencing the result of their keeping the law? The answer he implies is, "Of course not!" The wonders among them are the result of their having received the message of Christ crucified and risen and having put their trust in it.

Paul now fears that the trust shown by the people to whom he preached in Galatia, is being eroded by false teaching linked to arguments about how to be faithful to the God

of Israel. Paul must demonstrate that his preaching is, on the one hand, faithful to Scripture's testimony about Israel's God, and, on the other hand, faithful to the new reality initiated by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. To do these two things, Paul argues in two directions at once: first for continuity, and secondly for discontinuity, with God's previous actions.

Paul uses the example of Abraham and a quotation from Genesis to ground his claim that God has a history of recognizing, believing, or trusting as righteousness. Welcoming the Galatians as God's people solely on the basis of faith is something God has done in the past – and with the patriarch, Abraham, no less! If the teachers who have come after Paul are claiming that their teaching is to be preferred because it is based in the historic action of Israel's God, Paul is showing that history is not on their side but on his. Offering righteousness as a gift – apart from the law – is thoroughly in character for God.

And furthermore, the gift of righteousness – that is belonging to God – that Abraham received had within it, even way back then, the blessing of all the Gentiles. This means that the very people to whom Paul proclaimed Christ as crucified and risen are among the nations God planned to bless by blessing Abraham with righteousness.

So far, Paul has argued for continuity between God's action in the past and God's action in the present lives of those addressed by his letter. But while it is true that God's action in the present is in character for God, it is also true that God is doing a new thing in the present. Paul must also make an argument for discontinuity between an old age

and a new one as he begins to distinguish “before” and “after.”

So, what has changed? “You are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus.” Based on the original Greek, Paul here means, “grown up children” or “adult children” not actual little children. As Christ is a grown up, so also are those who have clothed themselves with him. And because the new age has come, the old structures of reality – things thought to be as woven into the fabric of being as Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female – no longer define reality.

In short, the baptized do not exist over or against each other. “You are all one in Christ Jesus,” he tells his readers and urges them to resist any teaching that would inscribe old divisions on the community. The effect of these teachers’ emphasis on law-observance would be to re-establish categories whose end was signalled by Christ’s death and resurrection. The teachers are urging people to go back in time. From Paul’s perspective, such a thing cannot be done and should not be attempted.

Paul seeks, among other things, to situate the Jewish law in God’s plan, God’s time line, vis-à-vis God’s promise to Abraham and God’s giving the gift of justifying faith in Jesus Christ, that is the law in its disciplinarian aspect. Responding to the teachings of the unknown Jewish-Christian teachers who urged members of the Galatian Christian communities to adopt at least circumcision - and perhaps other requirements of the Jewish law in addition to their faith in Christ, Paul presents only the negative aspects of the law; the law is critiqued as a negative and temporary measure between the covenant promise to Abraham and the gift of faith in Jesus Christ.

This negative function of the law is captured in Paul's term "disciplinarian," which refers to one who was usually a slave and who as a custodian, guarded school children and kept them safe. The word describes a rather dull, service job that one's charges outgrow. Until Christ came, and "until faith in Christ was shown to us," the law served a custodial purpose. Paul describes a limited use for the law and then announces that its usefulness is past.

Paul's strong language is that people were "imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith" came. Paul's critique of the law in this highly-charged argumentative and polemical discussion – only half of which we hear in Paul's letter – is "unfair." For despite this negative function and Paul's strong language here, he also believes that the law is not opposed to God's promises.

Under faith in Christ, one no longer needs the law in this disciplinarian function; one is freed from the requirements of the law. Paul reassures his Galatian audience that they are children of God through faith and not through the law.

Paul now introduces the theme of baptism into Christ. In reference to the early Christian practice of the newly baptized putting on a new white garment, Paul says that all who are baptized into Christ have "clothed" themselves with Christ.

Paul names three categories of social distinction, i.e. distinctions which are operative in the surrounding culture at large which are no longer valid or operative within the community of those baptized into Christ: Jew/Greek, slave/free, male/female. "In this

new life the old social distinctions no longer count before God. Although the external social conditions did not immediately change, the new reality did affect relationships in the Christian community.

Paul finishes his argument saying that members of the community which is in Christ are in truth Abraham's offspring, i.e. are included in those to whom God's original, pre-law promise was made. The circle of Paul's logic is now complete: God promised righteousness, that is belonging to God, to Abraham and his descendants; transgression entered in, requiring the imposition of the law to restrain sin; Christ has now come and the gift of justifying faith has been given.

We are one in Christ and it's up to us to keep our eyes on and faith in the crucified Christ. This new covenant through the body and blood of Jesus makes us one. God's promise to Abraham is fulfilled through Jesus. God has blessed the nations through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

In our era this is a conflict that is still alive and well in the form of denominationalism. There are good things that can come from denominations but there are also not so good things. The word denomination can be broken into two words, denom and nation, which translates to divided nation. Christ never intended for us to be a divided nation. It's when we're more passionate about keeping our eyes on the crucified Christ than focussing on all of the other things that make us right with God compared to others that we live out Galatians' "one in Christ."

If Paul were speaking to us today, perhaps he would remind us that our identity does not lie in the number of people on our membership roll (whether large or small), the amount of money people have given to our church so far this year (whether we're in surplus or deficit), the number of participants in our music or youth or other program (whether they're vigorously vital or seriously struggling), the condition of our buildings (whether newly constructed and visually striking or worn down and shabby). He would not call us to focus on any baseline or criteria that we could mistake for our own achievement.

As unity in Christ emerges, distinctions among us fade away. "You are all one in Christ Jesus" stands as an enduring eliminator of barriers and hierarchies we erect among ourselves. When we use race, ethnicity, or status as an inherent reason to look down on others; when we think that some group among us deserves to be less free than another group; or when we think that anatomical, physiological, or genetic traits make some people deserving of more power, influence, or respect than others ... "You are all one in Christ Jesus" serves as a corrective.

Jew/Greek, slave/free, male/female were thoroughly established differentiators in Paul's day. Paul told the people of his own time – and he tells us now – that, actually, those distinctions exist only in the minds of humans, not in the mind of God. Being one in Christ Jesus often scares us, even though it's a beautiful gift of God, one of God's promises that endures from Abraham to today and into the age to come.

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." The early church discovered

something amazing. When the God of Jesus gets involved in human life lots of things change!

People who would never have anything to do with each other are suddenly thrust into a life of faith with each other. In Paul's letter to the Galatians they have found that there are both Jews and Greeks in the church (who could have imagined?). They have discovered that men and women are sharing leadership (a radical thing at the time). And they have found that slaves and their owners are all sitting around the communion table together (slaves were used to serving their masters but not sitting with them to eat!). It was unimaginable and yet it was happening.

Both groups have experienced a radical change in their status thanks to God's sending and raising of the Messiah, Jews and Gentiles are now one. The division is over. The most basic divisions of the Greco-Roman world, at least from a Jewish point of view, have ended, in terms of whom God loves and saves. Given the history of the church, it is very difficult to imagine that Paul refers to a complete change in the social and legal realities of the ancient world, granting women and slaves equal rights. But all, from the most deeply pagan - to the most abject slaves to the most ignored women are welcome as children of God, the seed of Abraham and heirs of all that God has promised.

This great point of equalization before God is of momentous impact to Paul. He will insist that the Lord's Supper is enjoyed among all equally, that worship and prayer belong to all those claimed by God as heirs. This move is so subversive of normal Greco-Roman law that it hardly makes sense. But it is Paul's claim about God, based on scripture and

the lives of women and men claimed by the Holy Spirit.

The church is filled with all sorts of people. Some of the people in the church seem a lot like us and we click. It seems like old friends or family. Hang around long enough and they become old friends and family.

On the other hand, the church is also filled with people we would never choose to hang out with. But if we are honest, over time we find ourselves just as connected to these people who are different as we are to the people with whom we clicked right away. We find that our church family is more diverse than many of our homes and we discover that our circle of friends is stretched and even filled with compassion for people with whom we have little in common.

The reason for this is that we share the most precious thing in all the world. We are all connected to Jesus and made into the body of Christ through faith. It is not our own doing. It is a gift. And with it comes the miracle of a community of people that the world might never imagine. But to be within it requires no imagination. It is already present in our shared life together.

Amen.