

“For the Good of All”

July 3, 2022

Scripture: Galatians 6:1-10; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Paul’s letter to the Christians in Galatia is probably my favorite. I find it fascinating because he shares more about himself in that letter, I think, than in any of the others. We learn a little about what he did after his conversion. Unlike the story in Acts, Paul says he went into the Arabian desert for a while, I assume to meditate on this revelation he’d received. He went from trying to eradicate the movement to embracing it. He says he was more zealous for the traditions than his colleagues, which is why he went after the church so passionately. That zealousness remained after his conversion, only now it was directed the other way. He decided, through contemplation and prayer, that he needed to strip away all the traditions to become something, or someone, entirely new.

That’s an astonishing change. Not many of us would be able or willing to let go of everything we’ve been taught, everything that defines us, to adopt a new world view. It must have been a frightening experience for him, even if it was also exhilarating. We learn in this letter how Paul came into conflict with the leadership in Jerusalem, with James the brother of Jesus, and with Peter. They were supposed to be the arbiters of the tradition, the ones who decided what direction things should go. Imagine being confronted with this energetic, former enemy, telling them he had a different plan. Paul created a lot of tension in the movement, but without that tension, it would never have spread.

This letter is written to correct the community and bring them back to Paul’s understanding. Apparently there have been people working with them who had been trying to pull them back to the older traditions, especially requiring the men be circumcised. Paul has a fit over that. I don’t think he’s against circumcision per se, but against the idea that it’s a condition for acceptance. So, if you read the letter you’ll find he has some very harsh things to say about these people who are pushing this notion. For Paul, placing conditions on entrance to the community, on full inclusion, undermines the gospel.

It’s in this letter where we find that famous phrase, “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.” That’s a radical thing to say. It eliminates so many of the normal divisions in society, divisions that exist in our own society today. Paul believes the gospel of Christ ushers in a new era of human existence. All the traditional social barriers have been eradicated. So, at the end of the letter he enjoins them to be intentional about how they live together in this new reality. Instead of living in conflict with one another, they’re to bear one another’s burdens. Instead of holding onto secret knowledge and using that to assert power, they’re to share what they know, to be open and above board. And finally they’re to work for the good of all.

That idea, seeking the common good, is a thread that runs through all of Paul’s letters. When we commit ourselves to work for the good of all, we open ourselves to be aware of those who are left out. We measure our progress by how well the most vulnerable are doing rather than by how the most powerful are doing.

Working for the good of all was a principle I was taught lies at the foundation of our country's founding. This is July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend, so I find myself thinking about what I learned and what our Declaration of Independence really means. I think it's safe to say that, unlike Paul with the gospel, the men who signed that document didn't fully appreciate its significance. Was there debate over even the first "self-evident" truth they listed, that "all men are created equal?" How did they define "all"? Many of the signers, maybe most, were enslavers; they actually claimed ownership on human lives. Did that hypocrisy occur to them?

According to Harvard historian Jill Lepore in her excellent history of the United States titled *These Truths*, they absolutely must have been aware of it. There were many voices in that era protesting slavery. The Quakers, as a body, denounced it, calling it apostasy; they would not allow any of their members to own people. Other writers of the time were also deeply opposed to it. In Britain the famed satirist Samuel Johnson was commissioned by the Prime Minister with writing a response to the First Continental Congress' complaints over taxation. Lepore writes, "In *Taxation No Tyranny*, Johnson asked, dryly, 'How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?'" No amount of rationalizing by the founders could explain away this central disconnection between their ideals and the reality they lived. We've been haunted by that legacy ever since.

This is what Paul understood will happen when a community fails to embody its ideals. Even though there were divisions among the people in the Galatian church, he believed they could still behave toward one another in ways that would keep them unified. That was essential for him because he was convinced that Jesus' return was imminent, would happen within his lifetime. If the communities that bore Jesus' name were fractured, then how would they enter God's kingdom? The way to avoid that sad possibility was to live in ways that rejected the values of society and embraced the values of the gospel, values defined by inclusion and compassion and love.

And that begins with a willingness to divest ourselves of self-interest. The story in Luke's gospel of Jesus sending out his followers expresses that willingness especially well. He tells them to take nothing with them: no purse, no bag, no sandals. They're to put themselves entirely into the hands of God and anyone willing to receive them into their home. They aren't beggars, in fact they're not to greet anyone on the road. They are avatars for the gospel. They embody the values Jesus has been teaching. He tells them, "Just get out there and see how it goes." We're told it went well for them, but no details. But they're only able to do this by first dispossessing themselves of all the support we carry with us all the time. Have you ever left the house without your cell phone? How does that feel to you? Even that little thing that's only been around about 20 years can make us feel incredibly vulnerable and exposed if we're cut off from it.

Part of the point of this story is to show that carrying the gospel into the world will cost something. It demands something from us. Whenever we work for the good of all we have to be willing to give something up. In the case of the founders of our country what was given up, unfortunately, was the core principle of liberty. They compromised to maintain the peace. They thought they could put off the hard decisions until later, once they had gained their freedom from England. But giving up security, even when it's an illusion as enslavement was, proved too hard

for our forebears. They hung on to some twisted understanding of natural order that says human worth is determined by skin color and ethnic origin. They clung to the values of society and abandoned the values of the gospel to the benefit of the few and the detriment of all. We're hearing a lot these days about the Christian roots of our country. There may be some truth to that; the ideals they expressed about equality and fairness may be Christian, but the presence of enslaved people completely undermines those values. You can't have a society with Christian morals that keeps people enslaved.

If a society refuses to live its values, it cannot work for the good of all. That's what Paul is trying so hard to tell the Christians in Galatia. Their responsibility was to each other, not to their personal needs through acts of piety. What Jesus is training his disciples to understand is how they can let go of depending solely on their own resources and put their trust in God and the community. When they do that they discover a power they had never dreamed possible. When we work for the good of all by embodying, not just reciting but really putting into action, the gospel values of compassion and full inclusion, transformation can happen beyond our wildest imaginings.

And today, as we celebrate our nation's founding, we have a chance to put those values to work. We have a chance to let go of our dependence on a system that keeps people of color cut off from access to wealth and prosperity—"life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." We have a chance in our generation to live the self-evident truths our founders articulated well even if they were too afraid to embody them. Jesus, Paul, even our country's founders dreamed of the possibility of a new society. We have a long way to go, but that dream can still be ours if we're willing to do whatever it takes, to give up whatever we must, so we can bear one another's burdens, share freely so no one is left out, and work tirelessly for the good of all.

Amen