

The Rest of the Story
Galatians 1:13-17; 2:11-21
Northminster Presbyterian Church
May 21, 2017

Last week, we heard the writer of the Gospel of Luke and Act's account of the conflict in Jerusalem over whether Gentile Christians needed to live like Jewish Christians in every aspect, and how Peter stood up for Paul against the establishment to help the church get out of the Spirit's way.

Today we hear the rest of the story from Paul himself. Sure, Peter was supportive in Jerusalem but, here in Antioch, things are different. Why? Many have suggested that this event that Paul is describing to the folks in Galatia took place before the Jerusalem Council we talked about last week. That's what the ladies and I assumed in our conversation in Bible Study this week. But, more and more, scholars are suggesting that this actually took place later, after everyone had SAID that they agreed that the Gospel could come to the Gentiles, that the Gentiles didn't have to follow Jewish laws to be a part of the Christ-following community.

So, what has changed? One thing we know — it was around this time that the Christ following Jews in Jerusalem began to experience increased oppression by Rome, and began to be expelled from the Synagogues and temple. Perhaps, being open to the Gentiles was easy when they were not seen as a threat, but now, in places like Antioch and Galatia, the Gentiles were starting to outnumber the Jewish followers. And in Jerusalem, the Jewish followers were feeling more and more pressure from outside forces. Perhaps it was easy to talk the talk back in Jerusalem, but walking the walk was another story when they felt threatened.

Some have suggested Peter felt sorry for the Jewish minority in Antioch and was fearful the Gentiles would oppress the old guard. Personally, I'm not buying that. I think it has something to say about power and intentions in the face of challenge.

Regardless, Paul is incensed at Peter. Not because of his beliefs, which are likely identical to Paul's, but because Peter doesn't have the courage of his convictions. When the folks who hold the purse strings back in Jerusalem send their circumcision squad to Antioch, Peter is so afraid that he stops eating with these Gentile Christians. He withdraws table fellowship, treating them as though they are unclean, unwelcome — even though, as we saw last week, those are not his beliefs.

And here, in his letter to the folks in Galatia, Paul reminds the people that he read Peter the riot act in Antioch. And why does he remind them of this sordid insider story of the early church? It's because he's about to do the same thing to them, because the circumcision squad of judgmental Christians are back, now in Galatia.

Remember, this is the Christian community that is the farthest east and north that Paul ever travelled. It's far, far away from Jerusalem and he's deeply concerned that this fight will tear the church apart. The folks in Galatia want to feel like they are part of the larger church and these folks, who are telling them they are the wrong kind of Christians, have

them scared. But more than that, Paul fears that the peer pressure to go along could kill their faith.

Will Okun knows a lot about peer pressure. A while back, while he was serving as a public school teacher on the south side of Chicago, he was approached by the *New York Times* to pen a column about his encounters in the inner city. And so he did that for nine months. He started one of his columns with this quote from the security guard at his school: *“When I was growing up, we fought when there was a problem with someone else. But it was just a fistfight between the two people, and when it was over, that was the end of it,” [Officer William Smith continued]. “Nowadays, most of these kids don’t even know how to fight. They just rely on these guns. You really have to watch who you talk to because you don’t know who is going to be the crazy one trying to prove themselves with a gun. It’s ridiculous.”*

“Guns,” On the Ground Blog, guest writer Will Okun, New York Times, March 10, 2008)

Will Okun taught in Chicago’s inner city for nine years. He is now a journalist and professional photographer. He left teaching, in part, because he felt hopeless. In the nine months he was blogging for the *New York Times*, he wrote frequently about guns — how easy they were to get, how even one of his star pupils, a young man who was at the top of his class and would get a full ride to any school in Illinois, kept the number of someone he knew who would sell him a gun if he needed one. (Id.)

I can’t tell you how many times, in the gathered meetings of Southside clergy, I heard folks from the neighborhoods east of where I used to be near Midway talk about the fact that young men in Chicago, particularly poor young men, most of whom, but certainly not all, were either black or Latino, had become convinced they needed a gun to be a man. It’s a rite of passage; it’s security; it evens the playing field; it gets you respect. Or so they believe. And like so many of these — well, let’s call them what they are, Idols — that we turn to for identity and security, they can actually be dangerous.

I think that would have sounded familiar to Paul. After all, isn’t he asking the question: What happens when something — some action, some rite of passage — is seen as essential or desirable to achieving a certain status, but in reality undermines that status, or imperils it? That’s just what Paul is concerned about, on a spiritual scale. It’s not an understatement to say that, for Paul, instilling in a Gentile Christian the desire to be circumcised in order to be a “better” or more perfect Christian was like instilling in a teen on the Southside of Chicago the desire to own a gun in order to be a man.

Is circumcision evil? No. Is owning a gun evil? Some may disagree on that, but I have to say, not all by itself. No. But was Paul right nonetheless? I think so. And I think that’s why he prefaces the Chapter 2 statement of his conflict with Peter with the description of his own experience of faith. Let’s hear that part again:

¹⁵But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased ¹⁶to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, ¹⁷nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus...

So why does he want us to know that he didn't get the Gospel from any person and his teachings aren't the result of either flouting or following the Jewish Christian gang initiation requirements? Because for him — for us — there are no initiation requirements. Jesus' life, death and resurrection are the only rites of initiation and they're done already. Paul is imploring the Galatians — and imploring us — in effect saying: Let's not cheapen God's grace in Christ by saying anything we do or don't do is anything other than a celebration of having already been initiated; or that it's a faithful attempt to follow Jesus' lead. To go any farther is to say it is the Kingdom of ME, or the Commonwealth of YOU, not the Kingdom of God.

But that doesn't mean it's going to be easy. We like to compartmentalize and we like to judge others and ourselves. It's a way of not having to face our own insecurities — to say that person doesn't give enough time or enough money, or that person votes for the wrong people so cannot be a good Christian.

And the flip side, that person is better than me because she is smarter; that guy is better than me because he's out of debt, or that gang is for me because they have power and respect.

Any time we start compartmentalizing one another and saying — because he does this or she has that, or because he doesn't do this or she knows that — and we lift up that thing over the grace of God, we ignore our baptisms and we try to put place cards at that table, deciding who gets to sit closer to Jesus. That is not our job, and neither Jesus nor Paul is having any of it. And that's particularly true if, like Peter, we say and believe one thing but do another.

But let's be clear. Paul isn't trying to make anyone feel bad about themselves. He's trying to do the opposite, because he knows that if they choose identities other than as the beloved of Christ on which to place their hopes and trust, they will be disappointed.

There's one gentleman I think who understands that like few others. He's been known for so many things. He's had so many different ways to describe himself, to be identified. He's been a son, a husband, a father. He could also define himself as a hero, for that's what he was early in his career in the Navy, as a nuclear engineer who helped prevent a disaster aboard one of the first nuclear submarines. He could also define himself as the farmer and business leader he became, and then, when he became a governor, he could have chosen to define himself that way. Or even as the President he became, though he is fond of saying he's been a more successful ex-president than he was while in office. Still, with all of those ways he could define himself, if you ask him who he is, he would tell you that he is a child of God, a follower of Christ because, for him, that has always been the identity that most defines who he is.

This fall we celebrate the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther tacking his 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg. That act of defiance was born out of a crisis of faith. The prevailing theology of his day, now rejected by both Catholics and protestants — officially anyway — was that all of us would one day face judgment and where all of our sins

would be on one side and all of the grace we received from the church would be on the other. And only, if the scales were tipped on the side of the grace we get from the church, would we be saved. Luther saw that theology as leading only to misery — putting his trust in the church and not the grace of God was soul killing, and so he took a stand for grace and hope.

We are saved by Christ's grace and that alone is enough to withstand any other label the world tries to place on us.

You are not what you do; I am not what I do.
We are not what we have.
We are not defined by who we control.
We are not defined by who we love.
We are not defined by the people who like or love us.

We are God's own beloved. We are Christ's own delivered and baptized.

And that is not only enough, it is the foundation that allows all of those other things to not have to bear the weight of defining us.
For Paul and for Luther — that was the only way for life to have hope.

Let it be our hope and our great joy as well. Amen.