

C Narrative 37, 2017  
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Poulsbo  
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Galatians 1:13-17; 2:11-21

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

This is the first of three weeks hearing from Paul's letter to the Galatians. Paul is careful to lay out his credentials first: he is a Jew – a really, seriously Jewish Jew – who is now a Christian. And he is writing to Gentile Christians who are being told that they must adhere to Jewish practices in order to truly be considered “in.”

Paul is passionate about this, passionately against this idea, even angry sometimes. He wants to protect HIS Gentiles from the hypocritical teachings of these other Jewish Christians. Paul insists that the Galatians (and you) are not made part of the fold by circumcision or by obeying the Torah in any way.

You are made part of the fold by Christ. Period.

Verses 15 and 16 are Paul's thesis for the rest of the book: “We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith of Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith of Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.”

Paul spends the rest of the book exploring this thesis, and this letter is the basis for much Lutheran doctrine. But we in this country, with our language, lose the thrust of Paul's argument because we define faith differently than Paul does. We have come to see faith or belief as something we do; Paul sees it as part of Jesus' nature that we are enveloped in. When we see faith as something we do, it becomes a work, and works are not justifying. When we see faith as something we do, it becomes one of those tacked-on requirements that we heard about last week, deserving of a resounding, “No!” And that's what Paul says about it: NO!

In this letter to the Galatians, we would do well to remember that Paul sees faith as a Jesus thing. When we see the phrase “faith in Christ”, Paul is speaking of the “faith of Christ,” or, more precisely, Jesus' faithfulness to God. Christ's death and resurrection enfolded us into that faithfulness, enfolded us into Christ's relationship with the father. New Testament professor Sarah Henrich writes, “Jesus' fidelity to God...has drawn us all into relationship with God. The resurrection of Jesus Messiah **and** the gift of the Spirit ‘prove’ this for Paul. Secondly, and it truly is second, people receive the Spirit and we live in and through Christ and he in us through our own trust and faithfulness.” For Paul as he speaks to the Galatians, the death and resurrection of Jesus are not so much about atonement as they are about belonging. Through his own death and resurrection, Jesus has made us part of the fold, we are participants in the kingdom, in the body of Christ. We have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” Our trust in that position as a member of the body, and the Spirit dwelling in us causes us to follow, to live as the children of God we are.

But as we've been hearing these past weeks, this kind of all-God grace without any kind of “all you have to do is...” goes against our nature. We don't really want a God who makes life

choices for us. We don't want a God who says, "You're mine. You're part of this," without asking us first. We want a hand in our own ultimate reality, we want control.

And so Paul writes even to us today. Don't be fooled, don't be led astray by those who would put conditions on the death and resurrection of Christ and the mercy and grace therein that brought you into the fold. Don't succumb to the temptation to put the manacles of conditions on others, either. God's love for them is just as absolute as God's love for you. Just as free. And just as costly.

Just because we don't have a say in our own justification doesn't mean it comes cheap. Christ died. Christ was raised. And THAT is why you are part of the fold. Our justification cost Christ everything, and to put conditions on that, for yourself or for others, is to demean that sacrifice. If we still have to do something or believe the right thing or follow the right way, then Christ. Died. For. Nothing.

"Jesus' fidelity to God"...even unto death..."has drawn us all into relationship with God." Your behavior, your trust, your faithfulness on this side of eternity is WITNESS to that. But we may take no credit for that relationship, for our place in the kingdom, even for our participation in the Body of Christ. The Spirit has worked that for you.

And this isn't something new. Abraham and his clan were chosen by God to be his followers. Not because they already had faith but because God wanted them to. The law was given to them, not to help them somehow keep their relationship with God, but to show them how to live as the chosen people of God they were.

Jesus expands that covenant to the Gentiles, to you. In Jesus, you were chosen by God. Not because you already had faith, but because God wanted you. Following Jesus' teachings of love for the neighbor and salvation for the poor and oppressed doesn't somehow keep our relationship with God. It shows the world that we are the people of God in Christ.

Christ has brought us in all by himself by dying and being raised. We follow, we love, we lift people up not because we have to in order to stay in with Christ, but because, as part of Christ, we can't help it, because it is what Christ does in and through us. "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Period.

Thanks be to God!