

Pleasant Ridge Presbyterian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio
Worship for 13 June 2010
11th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Lectionary Year C

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New Testament Lectionary Text: Galatians 2:15-21

Sermon: Walking Through Galatia: American by Birth...

It was Alexander Hamilton who wrote, "If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself."

So, in an attempt to formulate a country and a government "of the people, for the people, and by the people" (Abraham Lincoln), the framers of this great country came together in 1787 to draft the supreme law of this country in a document that we call the Constitution of the United States of America. It remains the shortest and oldest written constitution in use by any country today. And it was perhaps William Gladstone, Britain's oldest Prime Minister (circa 1800's), who stated it best concerning this poetic masterpiece when he said, "This is the most wonderful work ever struck off at a given time by the brain and purpose of man."

"We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America." (Preamble) Even though some publishing companies have thought it wise to put warning labels on this and other historical US documents recently, I read and reread these words and take great pride in the fact that I am an American by birth. I am proud of the fact that this country inspired my father, an immigrant from Japan, to cross the ocean, become a citizen and literally work to achieve the American dream. I am proud that we have the freedom to gather and worship unlike so many even today

that exist under the tyranny of religious oppression. I am proud of the US Men's National Soccer Team who tied England yesterday in a great game at the World Cup in South Africa! The list goes on. I am proud.

There comes a point though where even the pride that we have for our nation can be overbearing and frankly obnoxious. I remember back in 1996 when I was interning at a church in Atlanta during my Seminary days. I had been given tickets to go and see the US rowing team compete at Lake Lanier. About halfway through the qualifying round where the US team was racing five other countries, a group of Canadians stood up and started cheering for the Canadian boat that had seemed to have taken the lead not only over the US but the entire race. In response, there was a group of our fellow Americans that stood up yelling explicative language to our foreign guests from the other side of the Great Lakes telling them that they were on US soil and to cheer for anyone else was the equivalent of fighting words. As this nearly escalated to a physical altercation, the lead boat came into full view. What they thought had been the red maple leaf on a white background (the Canadian flag) was in fact the red sun on a white background (the Japanese flag). The last words that I remember hearing from one of our fellow citizens was, "Well, don't that beat all."

In like fashion, as we continue our walk through Paul's letter to the church in Galatia this week, we stumble upon the reality that Paul faced this very conflict of pride and adherence to heritage turning obnoxious not only with his fellow Apostle Peter but at some level with the Galatian churches themselves. The conflict between the two giants of the early church (Paul and Peter) stemmed from Paul being angry because he felt that "Peter betrayed the agreement they had that allowed Jews and non-Jews to be equal partners in the early Christian community." (Wendy Farley) Peter had been guilty of hypocrisy because though he was happy to live like a Gentile (example: not observe the dietary laws of the Jewish community), he was not requiring the Gentile Christians to observe certain Jewish regulations. It was in Antioch, the location where Paul and Peter had their confrontation and a veritable mixture of people, cultures and faiths itself, where we learn that the tearing down of the dividing walls set up by

birthright made sense to Paul under the new freedom found in Jesus Christ. This created a crisis for the isolationist Jews like Peter, and, as a result, Jewish Christians in Galatia and beyond.

According to the Reverend Gregory Ledbetter, Paul saw Jesus as, ‘the fulfillment of the long arc of God’s love and God’s inclusion, an arc bent toward making Gentiles full members of the family. The pressure from Jerusalem would seem to imply that Christian Gentiles would barely attain the status of stepchildren. For the factions that pressured Peter, only a full embrace of the law and practices of Judaism would create a thin, admitting crack in the dividing wall.’”

Now, before we move any further, allow me to pause a brief moment and give weight to something that I think is very important to this text theologically. It was just yesterday, in a new member retreat, that we were discussing the temptation to start with a personal/political conviction and bring justification to it by salt and peppering the point of view with a Bible verse or two. We lamented the dangers of this because more times than none, the Scriptures in use are in fact misused and out of their proper context. It saddened me to be in conversation with a colleague earlier this week who, in light of this text, was planning on painting Paul as the great multiculturalist way ahead of his time and then present the gathered community with his personal opinions concerning the Arizona Immigration Laws that have many a person up in arms from many different perspectives. But, as I stated last week, the goal of Biblical exegesis (the critical study and explanation of a text) is to explore the meaning of the text which then leads to discovering its significance or relevance. We are to exegete the text and then apply it to the culture not exegete the culture and apply it to the text.

At its core, this text is not about:

-Birthright: Though Paul does clarify that they are Jews by birth, he is merely stating a fact. This has no real relevance when it comes to the grace of Jesus Christ.

-Borders: Though the Immigration issue is an important issue for Americans and it is not going away where one side embraces the posture of Robert Frost (“Before I build a wall, I’d ask to know what I was walling in or walling out, and to whom I was like to give offense”) and the other side embraces the posture of G. K. Chesterton (“Never tear down a fence until you know why it was put there the first place”), this is not what Paul is addressing in this text.

-Bootstraps: Though we are often told to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps (improve your situation by your own improvements), Paul says that this in a spiritual sense is totally contradictory to the grace of

Jesus Christ. He states, “And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the work of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.”

Quick Definition: “Justification...this is what a computer’s word processing program does to the margins – straightening up the words so that they are in right relationship to the page. This is what God does for sinners who are out of line. Messy human lives get straightened out, put in right relationship with God through Jesus Christ.” (Heidi Husted Armstrong)

What this text is about is exactly what Paul writes about to the church in Rome where he says, “For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23) “We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, yet we know a person is justified (straightened out) not by the works of the law (not by birth right, not by geographical location, etc.) but through faith in Jesus Christ. In other words, we all start at the same point and fall into the same category...sinners.

Allow me to try to put it into some type of perspective. Think about the greatest moral person in history and the worst. Make the best one number one (on a scale of one to ten) and the worst one ten. Now ask where you would stack up on that scale. Ok...I am not quite Mother Theresa so I cannot be one...I am not nearly as bad as Adolf Hitler so I cannot be ten. Maybe a three or four. Paul would look and point out that even Mother Theresa is as much a sinner as Adolf Hitler (for all have sinned = sinner) and are in need of Jesus Christ. It is Christ and Christ crucified, dead, buried, and raised alone that opens the possibility of justification through faith. Gentiles are justified by grace alone. Jews are justified by grace alone. Americans are justified by grace alone. Mother Theresa is justified by grace alone. You and I are justified by grace alone. Christ alone has done what nothing else could accomplish. He has leveled the playing field and straightened out humanity with God and one another, resulting in a new community altogether.

This is so easy to either forget or treat with a bit of laissez-faire in our faith walk. It was once said that the Gospel came to the Greeks and they turned it into a philosophy; the Gospel came to the Europeans and they turned it into a culture; the Gospel came to Americans and they turned it into a business. So often we lose sight of the centrality of the message of the Gospel because of other competing factors that it is often detrimental. We put other components (birth rights, boundaries, and bootstraps to name a few)

in the way and we end up losing the Way that ultimately states what Paul is trying to hammer into the heart of the churches in Galatia. “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” And if Christ lives in a person, they are justified by faith through grace, and thus members of a community that recognize what Paul writes within the next chapter in Galatians. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male or female, for you are one in Jesus Christ.” (3:28) This is in no way to diminish the unique persons that we are, but since our justification comes through Christ and Christ alone, when we are in Christ and Christ is within us, there is an spiritual equality that transcends everything (birthrights, borders, and bootstraps).

And if you choose to live in the laissez-faire...well, allow me to save you some philosophical thinking and take that lifestyle and worldview to its logical conclusion as it has already played itself out in the history of humanity. It was the atheist and existential philosopher Frederic Nietzsche who stated, “Equality is a lie concocted by inferior people who arrange themselves in herds to overpower those who are naturally superior to them. The morality of equal rights is a herd mentality and therefore it opposes the cultivation of superior individuals. It leads to the corruption of the human species.” And to speak again of Adolf Hitler...this is exactly what Adolf Hitler adopted as his philosophical basis for his grand experiment called the Third Reich. Victor Frankl said, “All that took place in Auschwitz and other concentration camps was not conceived by some defense ministry department but was generated behind lecterns and platforms of professors and instructors and educators. It was the lecturers and teachers that ended up generating the philosophy of extermination.” When you remove Christ and his grace that is the bridge to equality in God’s creation, the end result is simply tragic.

I leave you with what I once saw on a t-shirt. It stated, “I am an American by birth...but I am a Southerner by the grace of God.” I ask you to look at the posture of the message only. It is not so different from what Paul is telling us as we walk through Galatia. We are so many things by birth and borders and bootstraps. But, by the grace of God alone in Jesus Christ, we are justified, equivalent, and alive.

In the name of the Triune: Father, Son, Spirit. Amen.