

Galatians 3:23-29 (NRSV)

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 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. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

For the last several weeks, the epistle lesson has been from Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia. After our pleasant and productive congregational meeting last Sunday, I thought it would be a good contrast to talk about congregations that are a real mess and those are the congregations in Galatia. We'll be hearing about them for the next couple of weeks as well.

Ordinarily, when Paul in his letters addressed a congregation he would begin with a passage thanking God for the work of the congregation. So, in 1 Corinthians, even though Paul has some serious issues with the congregation, Paul writes, "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus."

Well, just from the introduction, the church at Galatia should expect a rough ride. In place of nice, soothing words, Paul writes, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to ... [those] who

want to pervert the Gospel of Christ. Let [them] be accursed!” Paul is *very* unhappy. Sort of makes you wonder who these other guys are and what they did.

That turns out to be a bit longer story, so let me begin by talking about what is at stake in this letter. Most Christians of this time, were, of course, Jewish, descendants of Abraham and still very much a part of Jewish thought, life and religion. As far as we can tell, Jewish Christians in these early days still thought themselves to be part of the synagogue and bound by the 10 commandments and the 613 statutes in our old friend Leviticus and the diet and calendar and hygiene requirements of Judaism. But Paul took the Good News to the northern rim of the Mediterranean Sea, to modern day Turkey and perhaps even Spain. In these places he preached the Gospel to people who weren't part of the Jewish mainstream, didn't know the 10 commandments and 613 statutes, the diet, the calendar or the hygiene of Judaism. Galatia, as it turns out is right in the middle of modern-day Turkey and while most of the outposts of early Christianity also had fair-sized Jewish populations, this area didn't. If anything, the people here were Celts, migrated down out of Central Europe.

So, it was reasonable for the Galatians to ask, what do we care about the 10 commandments, or about Leviticus or about not eating pork or shellfish and all that? This is a question that is more reasonable than it seems today. The Christian Church in its early centuries decided that it would remain solidly within the scriptural traditions of Judaism, including taking the Hebrew Scriptures as its Old Testament. There are more similarities in the calendars than is at first apparent – Pentecost was a Jewish feast before it was a Christian one, and had the same name, indicating 50 days after the Passover. And Christians still see the 10 Commandments as binding on them. Or do they?

You might wonder if you'd been listening carefully to today's reading from Galatians. Paul writes, "the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith." So, are we subject to the law or not?

Well, that's a little complicated. It turns out that people had come to the Galatians after Paul had left, demanding that the Galatians take on the Jewish statutes, calendar and hygiene requirements. Paul, in this letter is arguing that they do not. Who is right?

The word translated as "disciplinarian" in the quote is "pedagogue" in the Greek, and it means more like guardian than disciplinarian. In the Hebrew Scriptures and in mainstream Jewish thought, the Law is not the tyrant that Paul and Martin Luther sometimes make it out to be. The Law is God's good gift that instructs us how to live peacefully with one another and in obedience to God. The Law offers us a way to live justly and lovingly. The Law is not impossible to live by – indeed we are expected to live happily in accordance with the Law.

However, and here's the big "*however*," people don't seem to be able to treat the Law as this good gift. We seem to need to transform a law of love and peace into a set of requirements, a set of rules, so that we can judge each other, so that we can beat up on each other. And this isn't just the ancient Hebrews, although that is certainly what Jesus is talking about some of the time. But transforming God's gifts into requirements and curses is a sin as old as humankind but also as new as the newspaper. How often do we use the Law to label others instead of love them, to estrange them rather than reconcile with them, to punish them rather than to

uphold them? When we use the Law this way, it becomes the curse that Paul rightly scorns.

So, what *is* Paul saying? With Christ's birth, life, death and resurrection, we are a people beginning a process of transformation, a process that will not end until Christ returns, but nonetheless a process that has begun. In God's good time, the gift of the Law will become a part of us, a part so deep in us that we will become children not of the Law but children of God for whom love and obedience are as natural as our skins.

In the meantime, the Law remains God's good gift, God's good teacher, helpful for keeping peace and harmony with one another and with God. To me, it is a source of endless wonder that the Ten Commandments remain valid and useful guides three thousand years after they were given to humankind. They are truly God's good gift.

But we should also recall that the Law does not consist only of the Decalogue, the 10 commandments, but also of the 613 statutes in Leviticus and elsewhere. These statutes command us not to mix fabrics, not to mix seeds in a field, not to eat shellfish. What should we make of these laws?

First, there are important reasons for the statutes. So, for example, the LORD tells Moses, "I am the LORD your God. You shall not do as they do in Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you." In essence, you aren't going to be like everyone else. You are going to be set apart, different. In a day where there is an enormous pressure to be like everyone else, it's good to understand that we are to be different, that we are held to a different standard. Even if the specifics are the same, the idea that we don't have to be just like everyone else is a good reminder.

But, in the end, many of these 613 statutes are not so much commands of God for righteous living for all time as they are markers of what was then Jewish culture. Israel understood that it was to be different from the cultures around it, and many of these statutes were simply ways to enforce those differences. These statutes were the disciplinarians for a life apart, a life separate from the surrounding cultures.

With the mission to the Gentiles, what would mark the children of God was not to be the cultural traditions that guarded them in the past, but rather taking on a new life transformed by Christ. This new life would cut across all cultural barriers. There would be neither Jew nor Gentile, neither free nor slave and the differences between men and women would not separate them as children of God.

This makes life more difficult, not less. Where the Law once gave the people of God clear instructions on how to prepare food, how to dress and to farm, how to raise children, how to be a husband or wife, now we live lives full of decisions and alternatives and one set of rules doesn't answer all the questions.

You can see why Paul was angry with the Galatians and with the people who were arguing that the only way to be Christian was to be Jewish first. If they were successful, the mission to the Gentiles would not be a mission of freedom in Christ but rather a mission of ancient and not very relevant culture. For Paul, the whole point was that Christ crosses cultures to form a new transformative freedom and everyone was eligible.

Note that this makes the idea of "Christian culture" a meaningless phrase. Christ is open to, is offered to all cultures. It behooves us to wonder how much of our liturgy, how much of our

religious customs are not about Christ, but about the Northern European cultures that so many of us come from.

But there is good news, too. The social categories that used to divide people also no longer apply. We are “all one in Christ Jesus.” We pray, we discern, we confer, we act and then we confess our sin and uncertainty and begin again. Our most important guide is what Luther called the mutual conversation and consolation of the believing community, upheld by scripture.

The congregation, grounded in scripture and elevated by the Holy Spirit, learning, professing, discerning and confessing is where the Good News is heard, interpreted and applied. We are, truly, one in Christ.

Last Sunday, this congregation took a big step to authorize the construction of a new education wing, and I confess that my heart was in my throat, because I wasn't sure whether going ahead was the right thing or the wrong thing to do. That is, I wasn't sure until I listened to us, listened to the debate and discussion, looked at the faces of our young people and our grown-ups. I knew, then, that whatever we decided would be the right thing for us, because we are one in Christ. I'm still sure of that today. With the Law as our teacher, the Spirit as our Guide and the Good News as our compass, we won't go very far wrong. We are one in Christ. May God be praised.

Amen.