

*Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me.
I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential)
the gospel that I proclaim before the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain.*

*But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek.
Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in - who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus,
so that they might bring us into slavery - to them we did not yield in submission for a moment,
so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.*

*And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me;
God shows no partiality) - those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me.*

*On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised,
just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter
for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me in mine to the Gentiles),*

*And when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me,
They gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.
Only they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.*

Galatians 2:1-10

"God's Choice, God's Call, and Human Complexity"

Pastor Stephen Ridge

This morning we rejoin the apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians as he recounts to the Christian disciples there, how he, a man born and raised Jewish and trained to be a rabbi had instead become a Christian apostle, not one of the Twelve who had known Jesus in the flesh years before in Galilee, but rather Paul was his own peculiar kind of apostle. Paul had met Jesus in a whirlwind visionary encounter on the Damascus Road and had been struck down and blinded and then called by the risen Christ to become his messenger to the Gentiles, the faraway peoples all over the world, a calling that had landed Paul in the city square in a town called Lystra.

And this letter we've been reading Sunday mornings in church this month was written by Paul to a number of congregations in Galatia, near Lystra where believers, mostly Greeks and Celts, pagan people had given their lives to Jesus under Paul's teaching, and then, months later, had been accosted by rabbi's from Judea, kosher Christians who had taken it upon themselves to follow in Paul's footsteps, and warn the people Paul had won to Christ that the gospel Paul taught them did not include customs and traditions that the original apostles and disciples of Jesus back in the Holy Land had continued to observe and follow.

Which was true. Jesus himself had been a kosher man, not kosher enough to satisfy the Pharisees, nobody satisfied them but he was kosher. And the apostles Jesus chose in Galilee continued to live as kosher men, and they saw no need to tell the thousands of Jewish disciples who believed in Jesus in the early years to change their diets, or to stop washing their hands, or to stop observing their ancestral holidays. It was enough for Jewish men and women and children to put their faith in Jesus, to trust Christ to forgive their sins and the Spirit to change their hearts even though in language and custom and habit and tradition they continued to be Jewish.

But in Acts, chapter 11, way up north in the booming Syrian city of Antioch, Barnabas and Paul found themselves leading a congregation where "a great number" of Greek and Romans and other faraway peoples had also put their faith in Jesus and trusted Christ to forgive their sins and the Spirit to change their hearts, and in the same way it hadn't seemed necessary to anyone to instruct these Greeks to stop eating what they always had eaten, or to wash in a certain way, or to observe the ancestral holidays of old Israel which were foreign and unknown to them. But the result was that Jesus was fast becoming the Lord of a bi-cultural kingdom and it was getting hard for disciples from different places and in different places to stay on the same page.

And I haven't told you the half of it! To really understand the building tension in the Church between Greeks from faraway and Jews from old Israel you'll need to read in the book of Acts, from chapter 6 through to the end of Acts 15, paying careful attention to who speaks Greek and who is Greek in these stories. If you actually did it, it would take about an hour. But if you ever wondered if God had a sense of humor, you might smile at the thought that God chose Saul, a hot headed, bigoted, Israelite rabbi, and called him to become Paul the apostle, a process that needed Jesus to knock down, blind, and re-orient the rabbi into an apostle in a series of visions. Paul writes about all this in our Call to Worship that God had "set me apart before I was born."

The point being that even before Paul's birth, God had already chosen the young hothead rabbi to be his apostle to the faraway peoples. Why? God had "called me by his grace," Paul writes. God had called such an unlikely character, precisely because Paul himself had needed the grace that became the heart of the gospel Paul would teach the people he used to hate. Finally Paul writes that God "was pleased to reveal his Son to me that I might preach him among the nations." Being a rabbi hadn't helped Paul to find a Savior, being kosher hadn't brought Paul any closer to God. What turned Paul's heart around was the sight of Jesus, ferociously holy, powerful enough to destroy him, but instead Jesus offered him a second chance at life.

We talked last week about apostles and prophets being a special category of people, spectacularly blessed to see and know and teach things about God that would be beyond us all unless God had inspired prophets and apostles to write them down for us. So apostles and prophets are particularly loved and blessed and guided by God, and God is particularly tough on them, severely testing and humbling them when he calls them, and then leading them on a difficult path through the rest of their lives. Jesus promised the original Twelve that they would watch him carry a cross and then have to line up and carry their own.

Last week, Paul told us that, after Jesus called him to be his apostle "*to the nations*," Paul had not gone to Jerusalem to report to the original apostles that he had been called as one of them. Rather, Paul wrote, "*I went away to Arabia and then back to Damascus*." What we read in Acts chapter 9, that Paul didn't tell the Galatians, is that he had fled for his life, that he was lowered out over the city wall in a wicker basket and disappeared into the desert because a posse from old Israel had been sent to silence him.

Last week, Paul told us that, three years later, he had visited in Jerusalem with Peter and "*James, the Lord's brother...for fifteen days*." What he didn't tell the Galatians is that the visit was so short and he went so far away, to "*Syria and Cilicia*," because the same people who had stoned Stephen, years before, now had made up their mind that Paul needed to die in the same way. So the believers, who had only just begun to trust Paul, ruled him to the coast and put him on a ship to sail hundreds of miles away to wait for another chance to tell his story to the original apostles of Jesus and all those kosher disciples there.

This morning, Paul tells us, that he waited fourteen years in southeastern Turkey and then in Syria before he got another chance to tell his story to believers in old Israel. He tells us this morning that he finally returned to old Jerusalem "*because of a revelation*," some vision or word from God that this was the time to share his gospel with the original apostles and the kosher disciples. He doesn't tell us what revelation made this opportunity for him, but in Acts chapter 11 we learn that a Prophet named Agabus had traveled to Antioch where Barnabas and Paul were elders and exhorted them to make an offering to the church in old Israel to bear them through a famine that God had told him was on the way. We read in Acts that the Antioch Christians sent Barnabas and Paul with their offering and I think this would be the time that fits best the story Paul tells us.

Paul goes on to describe a tense but ultimately positive confrontation where men Paul describes as "*false brothers*" brought intense pressure on Barnabas and Paul to force Titus, a Greek Christian from Antioch to undergo circumcision, the first necessary step that would have obligated him to observe all the kosher customs taught in Moses' law. This Paul absolutely refused to do almost certainly in defiance of what most believers in the Jerusalem congregation thought should happen. After what diplomats today like to call a "frank exchange" of views, James and Peter and John all recognized, Paul tells us, "*the grace that was given to me...for*," Paul goes on, "*God who had worked through Peter in his apostleship...also worked through me in mine*."

Why does Paul tell such long, involved stories about his interactions with kosher believers who could not wrap their minds around a gospel that dispensed with 1400 years of tradition and culture and custom? And, more to the point, why do I love these stories so much? The answer to both questions is that God's Word, Jesus' Gospel, so clearly and plainly puts life into balance, and the anguish that arises in all our hearts into proportion, if only our minds can be freed to hear it for what it says, and to see it for what it means.

But our ever doing that cannot be taken for granted. We wrestle to bring our hearts in tow to the truth, we struggle to wrap our minds around truths from heaven that defy the delusions we sell ourselves to stay the way we are. But if we belong to him, God will bring us around and just a glimpse of him doing that, is worth the wrestling and struggle that seeking his face and listening to his Word entails.