

*But back then, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods.*

*But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back to the weak and worthless elemental principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?*

*You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.*

*Brothers and sisters, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong.*

*You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first,*

*and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me,*

*but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. What then has become of your blessedness?*

*For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me.*

*Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?*

*They long after you, but not for good! They want to shut you out that you would long for them.*

*It is always good to be longed after for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!*

*I wish I could be present and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.*

#### **Galatians 4:8-20**

### **"The Elemental Things and The Intensity of Discipleship"**

Last week, Paul reminded the disciples in Galatia that, before he arrived in the Lystra city square, they had practiced a pagan religion governed by what Paul called "*the elemental principles of world.*" And Paul taught that what he called "*elemental principles*" was actually a sort of shadowy spiritual alphabet, a system of rituals and symbols everyone in the ancient world used to worship their gods. Almost all temples, true temples, false temples alike, were located on hilltops to give worshippers a long climb to gear their souls for whatever spiritual experience waited for them at the temple atop their hill.

Now at Mt. Zion in Jerusalem, the spiritual alphabet, the rituals and the symbols told the truth. That's why in John's gospel Jesus told the Samaritan woman that: "*Salvation is from the Jews.*" But Jesus went on to tell her that "*...the hour is coming, already here, when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.*" The point being that, with God the Son in the world, walking and talking, living and dying and rising from the dead, it wasn't going to make any sense any more to think that any gods were going to live in stone houses atop this hill or that. Offering an animal to pay for your sins wouldn't make sense once Jesus had died on a cross, once for all of us, everywhere for all time. Going forward it was going to be personal, not ritual.

Paul put it this way, he said, "*...in the fullness of time, God sent forth his Son...to redeem...so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are his sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'*" It follows that the uphill parades, the animal sacrifices, the spooky consultations with priests and priestesses, oracles and prophets, the ritual foods, the ritual baths would all now give way to an experience much less tangible and visible, but much more real.

So this morning Paul reviews the change of circumstances for his readers, most of whom were Roman and Celts and Greeks whose spiritual alphabet had been pagan before they heard about Christ. So Paul tells them, "*...back then, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods.*" You were in the dark, he tells them in so many words. "*But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God...*" And what he meant was that to find and follow Christ was a whole lot more than picking up a new spiritual alphabet, new customs, new rituals, new doctrine, new attitudes.

To belong to Christ was to believe that God's Son had come down from heaven looking for us, personally, dying in our place, rising from the dead to break a path for us, people from everywhere, to get to heaven, not by following some program, new or old, but by trusting Christ, personally. And when we do trust him, his Spirit takes up residence in our hearts and makes us children of his Father. So Paul says to them, "*...now that you have come to know God, or rather to have been known by God,...*" Paul adds that second phrase "*...been known by God...*" because really, when we believe, it's God's work in our hearts that makes that happen.

"*How,*" Paul asks, when God has done all that, "*...how can you can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?"* "*You observe days and months and seasons and years!*" Paul observes in amazement. These disciples who know Jesus personally, spiritually, imagine they can improve their game by taking up Moses' calendar, the hand washing, the diet, the sacrifices, all that physical stuff they used to do for Zeus and Apollo, they want to do for Jesus, who has already made a highway into their hearts by his Spirit and who will change them if they don't get so caught up in the visible, tangible rituals that they miss the invisible Spirit and the Gospel he was sent to teach them.

"*I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.*" Paul writes, almost in despair. But he reaches out to them again, "*Brothers and sisters, I beg you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are.*"

It's actually a profound thing Paul has said. Everything the Judean false teachers want the Galatians to be, Paul once was. Absolutely kosher, all caught up with that Fiddler on the Roof beauty and stability and comfort that kosher rituals and customs and culture offered. But Paul had to throw it all over after learning from Jesus that God was up to something entirely new, and yet as old as Abraham and Seth and Noah and Job and Melchizedek, all of them believers before Moses and before Sinai, who long before Christ pieced out a gospel in the hints and shadows and they believed the promise that one day Christ would come. And now, Christ had come with a gospel that clarified the hints and shadows and with his Spirit to teach it to our hearts.

Paul hadn't shown up in Lystra in a rabbi costume with a foolproof kosher program to straighten out peoples' lives. He had dressed as an ordinary Jew on the road, and he told the tale of a Savior from heaven who had come to Israel to save the whole world, and, I believe, in the process of telling that story Paul got hurt. He reminds his readers: "...it was *because of an injury*, [literally - *a weakness in the flesh*] *that I first preached the gospel to you.*" Paul had been stoned by a mob in the city square early on in Galatia, and I think he aggravated an eye injury that left him shaken and weak as he taught the Galatians.

Paul puts it this way, he says: "...*though my condition was a trial to you, you didn't scorn or despise me, but you received me as angel of God, as Christ Jesus himself...if possible you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me.*" The point being that the affection between Paul and the Galatians was real and powerful, Paul was still touched by it even as he wrote. But now, with other leaders in play and disagreement in the wind, Paul has to wonder if there is enough affection left between them to support the telling of hard truths. He writes: "*Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?*"

He next moves into a turn of phrase about the false teachers that is so intense the translators invariably tone it down. Your blue Bible, the ESV, puts it this way, Paul writes: "*They make much of you for no good purpose.*" The NASV puts it this way: "...*they eagerly seek you, not commendably.*" The Greek verb here is "zaylao." We get our word "zeal" from this verb and literally it means this: "*They longed for you, but not for good! They want to shut you out [from us] that you would long for them.*"

Paul uses the same verb, zaylao, a third time, this time I think, talking about himself. Paul says: "*It is always good to be longed after for good purpose, and not only when I'm present with you, my little children, for whom I am in the anguish of childbirth till Christ is formed in you.*" What Paul is saying is that doctrinal crises involve a great deal more than doctrine, they involve people.

When people engage with one another to teach things and learn things about God an intensity grows around the exercise because facts about God invariably run straight to the heart. It can be wonderful when our intentions are good and the doctrine is sound. But keeping our hearts aright and our thoughts straight can indescribably hard. Years ago, a leader in the church, who had held leadership posts all over the community once asked me why everything was so much harder in church. And my answer was, "The stakes are so much higher here."

This is for God, this is about peoples' souls. There is no doing anything here without engaging and all too often injuring our hearts. "Zaylao" means to long for, to have zeal about, to feel jealousy over something, someone close to heart. Paul describes himself as "*in the anguish of childbirth*" over the spiritual struggles of the disciples in Galatia. For them, the re-introduction of "*elemental principles*" would likely mean a return to a halfhearted, repetitive, superstitious religion nothing like the real, powerful, Spirit driven, gospel informed, personal faith that actually grows from walking with Christ.

But there's no doing that without engaging the heart and working through the hard stuff, each of us in our daily lives, all of us in church. Small wonder then that people are tempted to keep their distance, play it safe, and go it by rote. Paul closes our passage: "*I wish I could be with you and change my tone, for I'm perplexed about you.*" After all, he's already called them fools, twice, in this letter. The word he called them is not the word Jesus forbade us to call each other in the Sermon on the Mount. Paul's word was a little gentler than that, but still right out there on the ragged edge. Because the stakes were high.

I've walked this ground myself with nowhere near the wisdom and integrity of Paul. Only by God's grace can we learn the balance between the objective wisdom and integrity leaders need, and the zeal and intensity God calls us to feel for his holiness and one another's well-being.