

CALLED BY GOD'S GRACE
Galatians 1: 11-24

No group gave Paul more gray hairs than did the Galatian congregation. In fact, we are not entirely sure if Paul's relationship with this difficult congregation in central Turkey was ever completely repaired. When you read the Galatian letter, you see Paul almost blow a gasket. He is really mad, because they seem to have rejected their founding pastor. This letter is Paul's way of reaching out to these young and seemingly confused Christians. Paul is hurt and does not hide his disappointment.

Why? What has caused this breach? It appears that some strict Jewish Christians came from Jerusalem to visit their congregation. Paul implies that these traveling missionaries "bewitched" them with beguiling words. These preachers insisted that the Galatian Gentiles had to accept the obligations of the Law, including circumcision. In other words, these interlopers were convinced these Gentiles had to first become practicing Jews before they became real Christians. Paul is adamant that these preachers from afar were completely wrong.

These itinerant preachers also charge that Paul is something of a second class apostle, a Johnny-come lately who does not really know what he is talking about. They claim to have the backing of the church in Jerusalem and the original apostles. They boast of a religious pedigree that Paul did not have. And thus they insist that they are closer to the truth about Jesus than the misguided Paul. Amazingly, the Galatian Christians seemed to have bought what they were selling.

So that's why Paul in our text tells the story of his calling and his early years in ministry. He tells his life story only for polemical purposes. He has a point to make, even an ax to grind. And the main point in this autobiographical sketch is this: I am not a Johnny-come lately leader in the church. I am not a second class apostle. I had a direct revelation of the risen Christ. I received a commission specifically to preach to the Gentiles. And I did not confer with the apostles in Jerusalem until long after my calling by Christ. I am not dependent upon the apostles in Jerusalem, neither Peter nor James, for my commission and my calling. I did not sit at their feet to learn about Jesus.

Now, some three years after my calling I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Peter and James. But this visit was not to receive their validation. It

was rather to get to know them as brothers in Christ. In fact, I met very few of the other Christians in and around Jerusalem. But when the Christians in Judea heard that I was proclaiming Christ, they gave glory to God because of me.

This rehearsal of Paul's life has one and only one point. Paul insists that his authority as an apostle to the Gentiles came directly from the risen Christ in a revelation. His ministry is not dependent upon the apostles in Jerusalem. His message did not derive from them. His theology is authenticated by a revelation from Christ himself. Here's the real point- Paul's Gospel does not require circumcision for believers in Christ. Paul's message does not require that one become a practicing Jew before one becomes a Christian.

Paul's life story is all about being called by God's grace. And that grace extends to Gentiles who hear the Good News of Jesus. There is no other requirement such as circumcision. Just a heart-felt trust and acceptance of this Good News about Jesus. That is what is required and that alone. Paul stakes his life on God's grace and he offers that grace freely to others. Grace and grace alone saves. Grace saved Paul from a furious life of opposition to the Gospel. And grace will save the Gentiles and bring them into a living relationship with the God of grace.

Sometimes we forget how many difficulties the early church faced. Issues abounded. Who had the authority to do what? Which of the many leaders could you trust? Which books and letters circulating around should you to listen to and read? What exactly did Jesus say and what did he mean? What is required to become a Christian? What is mandatory and what is optional in the Christian life? How are Christians to live under the Roman Empire? Exactly when is Jesus coming back again? Actually if you listen to that list, we have some of the same issues.

In one sense, the main question Paul faces in the Galatian letter is this: what should be the relationship of this new Christian community with the parent religion of Judaism? All the early leaders of the church, including Paul and Peter and James, were Jewish to the core. They understood themselves as followers of Jesus with deep Jewish roots. It was mainly Paul that moved them into the Gentile mission. So it was Paul who had to clarify the relationship between the parent religion of Judaism and this Messianic sect called Christianity. It was not easy and it was not smooth. Just consider what Paul's opponents said against him. This was a rocky ride, a contentious relationship right from the beginning.

And so it is often even to this day. I was looking through some papers the other day and what did I find? I found a 1969 Presbytidings announcing

a Jewish-Presbyterian Dialogue beginning with Temple Albert on Louisiana. It was called “Encounter for Reconciliation.” Some of you may remember that this dialogue involved education, reciprocal visits, shared worship experiences, community action, and youth programs. That Presbyterian dialogue with the Jewish community continues to this day.

In fact, this past week a number of us from the Presbytery of Santa Fe were invited by the local Jewish community for a time of dialogue. This time the issue concerns a Presbyterian study paper entitled “Breaking Down the Walls.” For two years a distinguished group of nine Presbyterian elders and pastors studied the long simmering conflict between Palestinians and Israelis. Their recommendations will be presented later this summer at our General Assembly in Minneapolis. Since the 1880’s the Presbyterian Church has had a presence in the Middle East. We have many times previously expressed our concerns about this conflict that dates back to the post-World War II era.

There are some challenging words in this report, criticisms directed at both Palestinians and Israelis. The report calls for a lasting and just peace with a two-state solution, a secure Palestinian state and a secure Israeli state. But the report insists that the Israelis have special obligations to seek out a just and lasting peace simply because they are by far the strongest military presence in the region. They are a nation with as many as 100 nuclear warheads, F-16 jets, tanks, and a powerful military. They are also the recipients of nearly \$6 billion a year in American foreign aid. Thus the United States has a critical role to play in brokering a just and lasting peace in that troubled region.

Our Jewish friends voiced some of their strongest objection to the report’s assessment of the continuing Israeli occupation of the West Bank and blockade of Gaza. The report calls this policy a “sin against God and other fellow human beings.” The report calls for an end to the occupation and a cessation of settlements being built there by the Israeli government. The barrier wall that divides the country is seen as finally counter-productive to a just and lasting peace. We can all certainly appreciate the legitimate fears of the Israeli population about further attacks. There have been far too many already. Yet it is clear to the members of our Presbyterian study group that the occupation of the West Bank, the blockade of Gaza, the expansion of settlements, and the presence of the barrier wall all contribute to continuing hostility and anger in the region. In all candor, I find myself largely in agreement with our denomination’s report and its findings.

Please note that the report repeatedly calls for a secure Israeli nation and a secure Palestinian nation. There are many criticisms of the Palestinian

situation including its rocket attacks from Gaza, its anti-Semitic textbooks and the terrible mess that Hamas has plunged Gaza into. The report is not blind to abuses and injustices on both sides of this conflict. For there to be a just and lasting peace, there will need to be tremendous changes, especially attitudinal changes on both sides. What is needed is simply “repentance”.

The report is acutely aware that in the words of the New Testament, “To whom much is given, much is required.” And Israel clearly has the upper hand militarily in this situation. To her much is required. Our Jewish friends acknowledged that last week the Israelis could have handled much better the first boat seeking to break the blockade to Gaza. Thankfully on Saturday the second boat was towed to port without bloodshed.

One of our conversation partners is Rabbi Joseph Black from Temple Albert. He invited us to come hear him speak at the Shabbat service about these issues. Sallie Watson, our new Regional Presbyter, and I worshipped with our Jewish friends Friday evening. The congregation was wonderfully welcoming and the worship service was lovely, especially the music. Rabbi Black did address these issues. And what is always interesting to me is how self-critical the Jewish community can be. Rabbi Black was both critical and supportive of the Israeli actions. Some of his sermon I agreed with and some I did not. But Rabbi Black gave the kind of sermon that allows for further conversation. For that I am grateful. And I am quite certain that we will continue this dialogue. And not only about foreign affairs but how we can cooperate more closely in dealing with the justice issues that face our community.

Now we in the Christian community do not all agree on matters relating to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Nor does the Jewish community. We have had many conversations with the Jewish community since the First Century. Some friendly, some not so friendly. Paul’s letter to the Galatians demonstrates that these discussions have been with us from the very beginning. My prayer is that this on-going dialogue will be conducted with sensitivity and candor and respect. We are all children of Abraham and we need to listen to one another with deep love and compassion.

Together we can still join in the Psalmist’s passionate plea: “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.” And so we will. May it be so. Amen.