

I so enjoy reading the epistles. Paul's letters offer such great testimony to the lives of first century churches. The first century Christians are both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians who are trying to figure out what it means to be a follower of Christ. How does one live that out? What does the Christian life look like? How are Christians intended to be in community with one another? Their questions still ring true for us today.

The only Scripture the early Christians have is the Torah and the prophets. There is no New Testament. The gospels have yet to be written, and the learning and struggles of the 1st century Christians make up the remainder of the New Testament. So we have the privilege of watching, listening, and learning from their struggles and their wrestling with how to live out their faith in Christ. Today we listened to a struggle that existed not only in the Galatian community, but one that seemed to be fairly widespread throughout most of the churches of that time, "What do I need to do to be a "true" Christian?"

In today's passage, we find Paul writing to the Galatian churches. He writes with great urgency and frustration and maybe even a tad bit of anger. He is very straightforward with his words and their meanings, so much so that it is often difficult for us 21st century bystanders to fully understand and grasp their meaning. What scholars have been able to piece together over the centuries is that Paul founded the churches in Galatia during his early travels. He lived amongst the Galatians and taught them the ways of Christ. According to Paul the Galatians eagerly accepted the gospel message and began to live by faith in Christ. Once the churches were established and somewhat grounded in the teachings of Christ, Paul left the community and continued on with his travels. Sometime later, false teachers came along and begin discrediting Paul and adding to the original gospel message that he preached.

This is the point where we begin observing the story. Paul hears word of the false teachings. He learns that the Galatian churches are starting to believe and follow these teachings. Paul is outraged. First, "How dare anyone preach a word contrary to the gospel of Christ?" Second, "How could you (Galatian churches) believe a false message? Do you not remember what I taught you?"

The best we can figure out is that these false teachers believe and are teaching that in order to be a true Christian you first must follow the Jewish law. You must be circumcised. Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians must not share the same table. You must observe certain days and festivals. And just as the Jewish law has many rules and regulations, so does the list that they must follow to be a Christian.

"No, No!" Paul cries to the Galatian community, "This is not true! Do not believe a word of it. Stop listening to these false teachers! If this is true, Christ died for nothing!"

Paul continues, "Let me share with you my face to face encounter with Peter. Peter, the apostle entrusted to share the gospel with the Jews, but who here, according to Paul, was clearly out of line in his message."

Paul continues and we listen to his words now through "The Message" translation. Paul says,

“Here’s the situation. Earlier, before certain persons had come from James, Peter regularly ate with the non-Jews. But when that conservative group came from Jerusalem, he cautiously pulled back and put as much distance as he could manage between himself and his non-Jewish friends. That’s how fearful he was of the conservative Jewish clique that’s been pushing the old system of circumcision. Unfortunately, the rest of the Jews in the Antioch church joined in that hypocrisy so that even Barnabas was swept along in the charade.

“But when I saw that they were not maintaining a steady, straight course according to the Message, I spoke up to Peter in front of them all: “If you, a Jew live like a non-Jew when you’re not being observed by watchdogs from Jerusalem, what right do you have to require non-Jews to conform to Jewish customs just to make a favorable impression on your old Jerusalem cronies?

“(Listen, according to the Gospel,) we Jews know that we have no advantage of birth over “non-Jewish sinners.” We know very well that we are not set right with God by rule-keeping but only through personal faith in Jesus Christ. How do we know? We tried it—and we had the best system of rules the world has ever seen! (but now) Convinced that no human being can please God by self-improvement, we believe in Jesus as the Messiah so that we might be set right before God by trusting in the Messiah, not by trying to be good.” (The Message, Galatians 2:11-16)

You see, Jewish tradition defines its identity sharply against Gentiles, against “non-Jewish” outsiders. Simply by not being Jewish, by not being “the covenant people,” the Gentiles are sinners. Paul emphasizes this common ethnic identity with Peter, with the false teachers, with all the other Jews that might be listening, those with Peter and those in the Galatian community. Paul reminds these Jewish Christians, who are most conscious of their ethnic identity, that as followers of Christ they share a common confession about justification, about being set right with God, through Christ. So in this new way of being that God has brought about through Christ, Torah observance is not necessary for non-Jews. (Hays, NIB 236)

This confession – which Paul presents as the common belief of Jewish Christians- is the heart of the message to the Galatians (Hays, NIB 236)

The NRSV translates the confession: “We know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law.

The Message translation offers the confession in more modern day terms, “We know very well that we are not set right with God by rule-keeping but only through personal faith in Jesus Christ. How do we know? We tried it –and we had the best system of rules the world has ever seen! Convinced that no human being can please God by self-improvement, we believed in Jesus as the Messiah so that we might be set right before God by trusting in the Messiah, not by trying to be good.”

So Paul's point is that we all are reconciled with God through Christ. It is not by our own doing — we've spent centuries failing at that — but it is through the faith of Christ that we are set right with God. So no matter how hard we work to “be good,” or to follow whatever rules and regulations that have been set in front of us that make us “Christian” or make us “worthy” of God's love; it's not going to happen. You can't earn God's love or God's grace because God freely gives it to us through Christ Jesus.

Paul speaks to that, he says “I tried keeping the rules and working my head off to please God, and it didn't work. So I quit being a “law man” so that I could be *God's man*. Christ's life showed me how, and enabled me to do it. I identified myself completely with him. Indeed, I have been crucified with Christ. My ego is no longer central. It is no longer important that I appear righteous before you or have your good opinion, and I am no longer driven to impress God. Christ lives in me. The life you see me living is not “mine,” but it is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I am not going back on that.” (The Message, 2:19-20)

So now we are back to Paul's testimony that we heard last week. He testifies to his new life in Christ. Paul identifies “completely” with Christ. Just as Christ died on the cross, Paul's old life — life of the law, life of rule keeping, life of trying to impress and trying to earn God's approval— his old life has died. There is no turning back. For Paul turning back means that Christ died for nothing.

The Message, translates Paul as saying, “Is it not clear to you that to go back to the old rule-keeping, peer-pleasing religion would be an abandonment of everything personal and free in my relationship with God? I refuse to do that, to repudiate God's grace. If a living relationship with God could come by rule-keeping, then Christ died unnecessarily.” (Galatians 2:21).

Instead, Paul is a new creation. He lives the resurrected life through Christ Jesus living in him. With great urgency, Paul urges the Galatian churches and he urges us to live such a life, to live as a new creation. Do not get caught up trying to “be good,” trying to do things that supposedly make you Christian. Christ freed us from all of that. Instead, you are reconciled with God through the faith of Christ Jesus. Live as though Christ lives within you because Christ does live within you! Hallelujah, Amen! Let's celebrate!

We did! We celebrated; seven weeks of Easter and then Pentecost! But you know what? It's ordinary time now and we are continuing on with our lives with Christ living within each of us. But what in the world does that mean? How do I live with Christ living in me? What do I do? What I say? Who am I to be?

“Na-uh Paul” I might say, “don't even go back there.” If we didn't hear it clear enough from you, Martin Luther has driven it home for all of us. “It's not by works, but it's by faith that you are saved.” We got it, I'm sure we're still messing up a bit on that, but remember *grace abounds*. What we want to know is “How do we live out our faith in Christ? What does that look like?”

I imagine Paul *might* respond something like this...

“Deedra” Paul says, “Did you not hear my testimony last week? Did you not listen to the sermon?” Christ reconciles us with God. Our relationship with God has been restored. God calls and relates to each of us in different and unique ways so that we might grow in faith and in our relationship and understanding of God.”

“I,” Paul continues, “have been called to share the gospel with the Gentiles. Peter was called to share the gospel with the Jews. God’s calling for you is different than mine. I can’t tell you how to live that out. But I can tell you what that has looked like for me and maybe that will offer you insight into how you will respond to God.”

Paul continues our imaginary dialogue by saying, “In the letter to the Galatians I said, ‘Through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.’ (Galatians 2:19) Here, I’ll try to say it differently. Through the faith of Christ, my old way of being, of relating to God and the world died. It no longer exists. Through Christ, I entered into a new reality where I was no longer in charge, but Christ who lived within me. With God’s help I let go of my ego. I let go of trying to be in control. And when I did that I was overwhelmingly surprised by how God transformed my life. I became “an instrument of God’s reconciling love” (Hays, NIB, p. 247).

“Does this help? Do you understand a bit better?” Paul asks.

“Well, kind of.” I imagine I might reply.

“In light of my testimony,” Paul might say, “go back and look at your questions. See what insights you have gained. See how God might be speaking to you through the testimony of my life and the life of my contemporaries.”

“Thanks Paul, I’ll do that,” I say.

So now back to us, what were the questions we asked?

Oh yeah, “How do I live with Christ living in me? What do I do? What I say? Who am I to be? How do I live out my faith in Christ? What does that look like?”

Well, in light of Paul’s testimony, I would say maybe I’m asking the questions wrong. “How do I live with Christ living in me?” Well, according to Paul, as a Christian I don’t live. Rather, it is Christ who lives within me. So I don’t make the decisions or decide the specifics of “How do I live?” What do I do? What I say? Who am I to be? How do I live out my faith in Christ? My decision is to turn all of that over to Christ who is living within me, to give God all of my ego, to give God all of my control. That would mean to fully accept and live into God’s call whatever it may be. When we surrender ourselves to God, when we give all of ourselves to God, then (according to Paul) that’s when God is able to transform our whole self and not just the bits and pieces of ourselves that we’ve been offering to God to represent our whole self. By giving God my whole self, I (as Paul would say) have been

June 13, 2010
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crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

So by giving God my whole self – by being crucified with Christ—I surrender the control of knowing what my life might look like. Living with Christ within me means I am completely open to the transforming power of God's surprising call. Which also means that through Christ God empowers me to do things I could have never imagined, things I could have never planned or dreamed up myself.

So using Paul's testimony in the letter to the Galatians, the answer to the question, "How do we live out our faith in Christ?" is convolutedly simple. We live out our faith in Christ, by allowing (with God's help) Christ to fully live in us.

Amen.

May God empower you so that Christ may fully live within you.