

First Presbyterian Church
Gal 2:11-21, “Walking the Line with Peter and Paul”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 9/15/2024

Here we are in the second week of our series on
Galatians: Family, Faith, and Freedom.
(There’s an outline on the table just outside the door.)

We saw last week that as Paul starts out this letter,
it quickly becomes clear that he’s comin’ in hot. He is non-plussed.
He’s hot around the collar. He’s steamed, miffed.
He’s got a bee in his bonnet *and* he’s got a bone to pick.
Are you getting the picture?

Why is Paul so upset?
Because the very DNA of Jesus’ gospel is being threatened
by people who don’t accept Paul’s perspective on how non-Jews
should be added to the people of God.

Specifically, they were concerned that Paul said Gentiles who follow Jesus
did not need to be circumcised in accordance with the covenant of Abraham.

Now a couple things jump out:

- 1) How many of you woke up in the middle of the night at some point in the last...*year*... worried about whether or not your son, nephew, or grandson needed to be circumcised in order to be part of the church? (C’mon, raise those hands high!) This is simply not a question that we are asking today.
- 2) What unites our sons, nephews, and grandsons? They’re all male! The very fact that this rite focuses on how males are included rather than all people shows that we’re dealing with a highly patriarchal, male-centered practice. Again, that’s not the way we tend to think about things today. (Or at least we’re trying to learn ways to be more inclusive!)

If Paul was so upset about a controversy regarding a practice
we aren't wondering about today which comes out of a patriarchal system
we aren't operating from,
then why should we care about the letter of Galatians at all?

I'll tell you why: Because underneath the stuff we don't care about
is a conversation about *belonging and identity*.

What unites us as followers of Jesus?

What is essential to our identity as God's children?

Families, friend groups, and churches are being ripped apart by questions
about identity and belonging right now.

We might not be wondering about circumcision like the early church was,
but we are tempted to define our identity *today*
in ways that threaten to distort the gospel of Jesus Christ.

At the heart of all this theology talk is an emotion that you know well.

You're with a group of new acquaintances and everything is going well.

The chit-chat develops normally, until you share something that
reveals a bit more about your values and experience.

Let's say you mention that you've been divorced.

Or someone asks about your spouse and you say, "Oh, I'm single."

Maybe you share that you volunteer at Community Dinner

or Wednesday Breakfast, giving food to homeless people.

Perhaps you include a detail that you or someone in your family
are gay or lesbian or transgender.

Could be you mention going to church *and* a small group Bible study.

Or that you support gun rights and shoot guns yourself.

You share this, and there's a noticeable shift in the group.

One woman fakes a half smile and excuses herself.

A couple of men look down awkwardly and shuffle their feet.

You glance around the group and nobody makes eye contact.

What have you just learned?

That this part of you – your identity, your values, your practices,
your way of being – is not fully accepted.

That feeling is powerful. We work really hard to be accepted,
because belonging to a group means survival.

Being an outsider, being alone, means fending for yourself.

And it hurts.

I'm going to tell you two stories that are found in Galatians chapter 2
that connect this theological question to the emotion of belonging.

First, is the story of Titus. Titus was a young Greek convert to Christianity
who was a messenger and traveling companion of Paul's.

Since he was raised in Greek culture, he was never subject to the Jewish practices.

So Paul brings Titus with him to meet with the leaders of the church
in Jerusalem – this would include the apostles Peter and James,
maybe others. He goes there *not to submit to their leadership*,
but to make sure everyone is on the same page
about the nature of the gospel.

He presents the gospel he preaches to these leaders. And Titus is there with him.

He lays out salvation by faith in Christ alone,
reconciliation with God through the victory won
by Jesus' death and resurrection, being
united with Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit
as a downpayment on God's promise of redemption
through a new heavens and a new earth.

What did the Jerusalem leaders say? According to Paul, they had no issues.

No concerns. Double thumbs up.

What about Titus – does he need to follow the Jewish practices
around circumcision? Nope, we're good.

Case closed? It seemed like that to Paul: Titus is in! That's gotta feel good!

But it appears that for the Jerusalem church,
this was one of those conversations that just kept gnawing at them.

Every day they as were churning through what had been said.

Maybe James and Peter were wondering,

“Why didn’t we bring up God’s covenant with Abraham?”

“Why didn’t we insist on the importance of continuity with God’s own plan
for marking us out as the distinct people of God?”

[PAUSE] “You know what’s going to happen? These Gentiles are going to forget
all about the ways of Israel which Jesus upheld,
they’re going to eat meat sacrificed to idols
and drag the name of Jesus through the mud.

In the end, they won’t be any different from anyone else.

We have to put our foot down and insist on integrity

and trust in the Word of God. Jesus is the Messiah of Israel, after all!

If they are joined with Jesus, they are joined with Israel.”

This leads to the second story about Peter (Cephas),
which you heard in the scripture reading today.

Paul gives us the big picture, but I’m going to fill in the gaps with some
hypotheticals. This is the kind of situation which scholar
Nijay Gupta suggested in the pastor’s conference
I attended last spring.

Imagine that Peter is coming to Galatia for a visit to the churches.

Everyone is thrilled – Peter was literally one of Jesus’ closest friends!

He walked on water! He spoke at Pentecost! This is awesome!

Initially all these invitations go out for Peter to come over for lunch or dinner
or to preach at a worship service,

and Peter accepts them from many different groups.

When he shows up, he eats whatever they put out—even if it was not kosher meat,
but had been purchased in the town market where the meat
is offered in the name of an idol.

Then some men who are friends with James come from Jerusalem,
and they frown on what Peter is doing.

They get in Peter's head saying,
"It's going to scandalize the faith of Jewish Christians
to have you eating with Gentiles.

They feel like you've turned your back on them.

It's not so good for you to take these invites."

After these friends of James come... Peter isn't going to Gentile houses anymore.

But he *is* going to Jewish houses! People take notice, ask questions.

The men from James start saying to the Gentiles,

"Well, if you want Peter to come to your house,
maybe get circumcised?

Maybe start living the Jewish way if you have faith in the Jewish Messiah?"

This makes Paul hopping mad.

Because either faith in Jesus Christ is sufficient to enter in to the
new covenant of grace that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection
has initiated ... or it's not!

And if you have to become a Jew to be saved by grace, then that's no grace at all.

And would mean that non-Jews were second class citizens in the church.

Is there a problem with being a Jew? Of course not!

Paul is a Jew, and very proudly so.

But to insist on following Jewish practices

denies the radical power of what God has done in Christ to set us free
from sin and death and ... the law.

If only the church had learned its lesson back in the first century.

But it didn't. Generation after generation, we argue about denominationalism.

Literal wars have been fought over theological differences
and the powers aligned with one church vs. another.

Mission practices. The Gentiles were not to be forced to become like the Jews,

but European missionaries would *definitely* expect native people
in Asia, Africa, South America, and North America to become
like European Christians.

If you have to cut your hair and lose your language to follow Jesus
and be saved by the gospel, that is no gospel at all.

This is not ancient history. Today we have Christian nationalism.

Combining American patriotic myths with Christian symbols and prayers
to justify a claim that God's heart has a special place for America,
and so whatever America does to protect itself is justified.

Social Justice. There is an identity formed around being
anti racist, lgbtq inclusivity, environmentalism, gun control, and feminism
that gets branded as "this is what real followers of Jesus do."

And if you don't walk the line on those things, you'll get excluded.

How do political views and identities interface with our identity as God's people?

Fill in the blank: "A person who really understands
what Jesus is about would never..." fill in the blank for yourself.

Now look – the Apostle Paul *did* fill in the blank.

He said a person who really understands Jesus
would never exclude someone
because of their cultural identity and practices.

The point here is that what unites us as the people of God
is one thing: The person of Jesus Christ who loves us and calls us near.
Jesus doesn't need you to add anything to the love of God in Christ.
God's grace doesn't need protecting. Grace can stand alone.
Grace can even withstand the things you despise about yourself.

Remember, Galatians is Paul's letter to save the church.

The biggest threat to the church has always been from within.
The gospel of reconciliation is still needed today.

So when you feel an identity conflict with someone, ask yourself this question:

"Am I expecting this person to be part of my group instead of their group?
Or am I willing to call this person my sibling in Christ because God's grace
is even big enough for the two of us *as different as we may seem?*"