

Proper 5C - Galatians 1.11-24

The passage of time is an irresistible force that we as humans can observe and yet cannot change. Humans have tried to make sense of time and of change for millennia. Of all living creatures, we are the only ones to have a sense of the passage of time. But how do we make this passage of time meaningful? We mark its passage, as seasons come and seasons go, by the commemoration of great events.

Christianity has made time holy, giving time heavenly meaning, by imposing upon the passage of seasons the remembrance of the mighty deeds done for us in reconciling us to God and making us his children. The Lectionary and Kalendar take us by the hand and say to us, “Look here at Jesus’ birth, circumcision and baptism. Look here at his ministry, his healings and his parables. Look here at his suffering, his love for his disciples, his rejection by his own people. Look here at his passion and death. Look here at his resurrection and ascension. Look here at the coming of the Holy Ghost and the manifestation of that great mystery, the Holy and Undivided Trinity.” The Church makes time holy, makes us holy and leads us all to the new creation that is to come.

Now we have come to that great, some say eternal, green season of Trinity. Yes, I know that the latest Prayer Book says Common Time, or Season after Pentecost. But for almost 1,500 years we counted this season as Sundays after Trinity. Why? Because we are now living in the mighty, and life giving truth which is the Triune God. Our color is green because we have been grafted into that divine life, that eternal, and three personed love by our adoption as sons of the kingdom. Our season is long for we are brought forward, no longer as slaves, but as friends, to enter into Jesus' own ministry to call the world back to the Father.

None of Jesus' disciples understood this watershed moment, this hinge in the passage of time, the way that St. Paul did. True, it took a bright vision from heaven, but it was Paul, formerly Saul, who grasped the consequences of Jesus' death and resurrection on behalf of his wayward people. If the Father had acted in the death and new life of his own Son, the Messiah of Israel, then now it had to be time to bring in the Gentiles. The prophets had spoken of this time, this green and fertile time stretching into the new creation. Now, the time

had come and Paul had a call to bring the Gentiles into the people of God.

But ministry can be difficult. As we see from the Epistle lesson from Paul's letter to the Galatians, when the Gospel is preached, conflict arises. Sometimes people just don't know how to relate to their minister.

After the service can be especially difficult. Often ministers will hear comments like, "You always manage to find something to fill up the time." "I don't care what they say, I like your sermons." "If I'd known you were going to be good today I'd have brought a neighbor." "Did you know there are 243 panes of glass in the windows?" "We shouldn't make you preach so often."

And a church newsletter included some tongue-in-cheek suggestions for church members unhappy with their pastor: "Simply send a copy of this letter to six other churches who are tired of their ministers.

Then bundle up your pastor and send him to the church at the top of the list. Add your name to the bottom of the list. In one week you will receive 16,436 ministers, and one of them should be a dandy. Have

faith in this letter. One man broke the chain and got his old minister back."

Of course, we know how true this can be in our own day, but we may be surprised to find that pastoral conflict is the backdrop to a book of the Bible, Galatians to be precise. Galatia, part of modern day Turkey, first heard the good news about Jesus, the Messiah of Israel and Son of God, from Paul. He was their missionary, their pastor. He had lived humbly, even meagerly in their midst and shared the astonishing news that there was a new king who had brought life out of his own death, to the whole world. But after he had departed from them, other teachers from Israel had followed his tracks and had taught them a different gospel. These new teachers had troubled the Galatians minds by insisting that they had to observe the traditions of the Jews if they wanted to become full-fledged Christians. More particularly, they insisted that the Galatians be circumcised as a sign that they had adopted the full life of Jewish piety.

As a result of this new teaching, these new teachers remarked how Paul had not taught them the tradition of the elders. Paul had not given them the whole truth. These teachers claimed that Paul had

been teaching a gospel of easy faith; not the tough message of circumcision and adoption into Israel. Therefore, Paul's ministry was defective. He was not to be believed. The Galatians should bid their apostle and missionary goodbye, and join the cause of the new teachers. So we find that there are critical questions posed in Paul's Epistle to the Galatians. Whose authority and ministry is authentic? Was it Paul, or the new teachers, who were trying to curry favor with their audience? Whose message was for sale? Who was only in the ministry to please their listeners, and who was actually serving by divine call?

To contradict these charges Paul begins Galatians with this claim: Paul, an apostle – not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead. Paul, a messenger from the risen Messiah and the heavenly Father who raised him from the grasp of death. This is his message of good news – eternal life by following the true king who lives eternally. There is no other good news. And if anyone else told them differently, they were lying to them. So much for mincing words! Paul speaks tersely to his Galatian children. If they did not believe his heaven sent

message, they would have believed a counterfeit gospel, and were in great jeopardy.

But what evidence might he offer to substantiate his claim? He presents them with his own desperate testimony. Paul was not a lifelong disciple of Christ. No, far from it! Paul had been a zealous member of the most traditional party of the Jews: the Pharisees. They had been Jesus' opponents throughout his ministry. They had conspired with the Sadducees to put Jesus to death. Paul, then Saul, had stood by, holding the coats of his countrymen, while they stoned the deacon Stephen to death. He persecuted the young Church, dragging her faithful into court and prison. This is shocking testimony from a man who now wandered the countryside proclaiming the good news of that same Jesus!

What could have made such a change in this man's life that even his name had gone from Saul to Paul? It was God himself who had made that change. For Paul tells the Galatians, "He who set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles."

Paul's enemies had charged that he had made up his easy message to

make quick friends and influence a broad audience of Galatian gentiles. Paul's reply is that he didn't make up anything; he had gotten the greatest of messages, the good news of Jesus, from Jesus himself. But not only that, the Father, the true God of Israel, had set him apart for his ministry to the Galatians before he was even born! It was God's sovereign will that he minister to them. Even his own wickedness, and desire to pour scorn out upon the crucifixion of the true Messiah could not sway the Father's will. He was converted from his blasphemy and sin and made apostle to glorify the Father in his life. It was that gracious outpouring upon the vengeful Saul that turned him into the mighty Paul. It was not because he love God that he was converted to faith in Jesus. No, it was because God loved him that Paul became a minister. God's grace was effective, it was irresistible, it was life changing.

As we consider this passage from Paul's message to his precious children in Galatia shall we not meditate also upon our own call and our own conversions? For we must indeed be converted from the realms of sin and Satan and brought into the kingdom of Christ. Even so Paul writes that each one who believes in Jesus, has been given the gift of the Holy Spirit has been called by the Father. So Paul says to

the Ephesians, “He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.” We who were foreigners to the courts of heaven and strangers to the God who has created us, we have been found and changed. For Paul reminded the Galatians, “Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God.” Shall we who have believed in the good gift of Christ not give great thanks that we have been known, have not been forgotten, have been converted into heirs of the kingdom? Shall we not seek each day to improve upon that conversion – to know the will of God and to do it?

And finally, you in this Parish seek to call a holy man, a godly man, a man who will preach the only good news of Jesus Christ. Do not forget how vitally important it is that you seek the will of God in this matter. For it is not a matter of business or propriety that you are about. Certainly, you must be able to pay a minister a living wage, and a wage that you as a parish can afford. But it is not a business decision. Nor is it simply propriety that a parish must have a minister and so you shall go out and get one. Any one will not do! I do not mean that you must search for a candidate without sin or

shortcoming. That is impossible this side of Heaven! But each of you must prayerfully seek the will of God, asking of the heavenly grace that he may send a minister who will speak the good news of Jesus in season and out of season, for the salvation of the world and the glory of the Father.