

Proper 7C Gal. 3.23-29

The apostle Peter wrote in his second letter describing what he thought about the apostle Paul's letters. He wrote, "Our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand." Paul is hard to understand. In a meeting I had recently with a member of another parish, they said to me, "I've really never much liked Paul." Paul is hard to understand.

Of course it would be convenient to discount and discard Paul like so much old clothing, as apparently this man had done already. But he wanted to know why I hadn't. And so I, following Peter's exhortation, girded up myself to make a defense to anyone who called upon me to account for the hope that was in me. Why Paul? He is so hard to understand. It is true that he wrote a large part of what we call the New Testament. But quantity is not necessarily quality. What can we say of his content? Our passage from Galatians is a great view into Paul's ministry and his gospel. "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there

is nether slave or free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” This crescendo concludes one of Paul’s most notoriously difficult passages. But his conclusion is breathtaking. What God the Father has done in the Messiah his Son is to make a new nation, breaking down old barriers. The new Creation long promised has been inaugurated in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The promise to Abraham has been fulfilled.

But how did we get here? If this is the answer, “no Jew nor Greek”, can we figure out what the question was? Let us try. Paul had been called by Jesus himself to minister as evangelist and apostle to the Gentiles. He had brought the good news of Jesus’ kingship to the Galatians, in modern day Turkey, in the same way that he had to the Gentiles in Antioch, which is also in Turkey just north of Lebanon. Paul had checked in with the apostles Peter, James and John in Jerusalem, describing the wonderful conversion of the Gentiles as he preached to them about their master and teacher, Jesus of Nazareth. Having heard the content of his message, they confirmed that he had a calling to ministry and gave him the right hand of fellowship, adding nothing to his message.

Later, Peter came to Antioch to visit the mission work there. While he was there he sat down at the table with the newly converted Gentile Christians and ate meals with them in full and loving fellowship. This was a momentous achievement. Peter, a pious and law abiding Jew, was careful about abiding by the cultural, ceremonial prescriptions of Jewish Law, Torah. Good Jews weren't supposed to share meals with Gentiles. They were worshippers of false gods. They were sinners. They were to be shunned and not welcomed. Yet, Peter had come to believe that he could indeed share table fellowship with these Gentile converts.

But once other representatives from the conservative party in the church in Jerusalem arrived, Peter removed himself from the company of the Gentile Christians. He would not eat with them any longer. He would not associate with them for fear of being criticized by the traditionalists, the "circumcision party". Paul was very angry. He writes that he opposed Peter to his face because the very truth of the Gospel was in jeopardy! Yes, jeopardy! We may be confused at this point. There has been no denying the divinity of Christ or his

salvation of the world. What could be the problem? How is the gospel in jeopardy? The traditionalists, the conservatives, the “circumcision party” was demanding that Gentiles be circumcised before they could become first class Christians. They were trying to maintain some kind of preferred status within the fellowship of the Church. They were demanding that the way to fellowship with the one true God was through the continued observation of the ceremonial, Jewish Law. Peter was really in trouble because he had been caught cheating, by eating with the uncircumcised. He was waffling. He was straddling the fence. And Paul had caught him.

Paul said to him, “Peter, you and I are Jews and not dirty Gentiles, and yet we know that no one is in God’s family based upon the Jewish Law, but through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah.” The Jewish Law could only condemn transgressions committed against the true God and his law. It could only serve to divide Jew from Gentile. It could only trap the world in death because of sin. But the Messiah had come and had died and had risen. Now, Paul says to Peter, there is a way out for the Jew and the Gentile alike. It is through faith in the obedient Messiah.

But why faith? Why is Paul so interested in faith? Wouldn't it have been better for the Gentiles to obey the rules? God had given the rules, had he not? There in dark cloud and fire, resting upon the top of Mount Sinai, he gave the Torah to Moses. The Israelites committed themselves to keeping the law. The sign that they were a member of that nation that possessed and kept the law was circumcision. It said to the whole world, we are God's people. We are law keepers. If the Gentiles want to be God's people, should they not be circumcised as a sign of their admission into the Jewish nation and keeping the Torah? Would they not then be justified, that is, considered members of God's family?

Paul says, NO. Why? Is Paul opposed to the Jewish Law? Was he, after all, a heretic, starting his own new religion? NO. No, Paul reminds the Galatians that as ancient and venerable as the Jewish Torah was, God had acted even before that. He had acted, not to give a Law, but to give a PROMISE, to Abraham. He promised Abraham a land, and he promised him an heir. And Abraham believed that promise that God had made to him. And God justified Abraham. He

brought Abraham into his family. A family marked out, not by circumcision, but by faith.

So, Paul asks, did God keep his promise to Abraham? Yes, he gave him a son. Isaac was a premonition of that final fulfillment, but he was not the son in view here. No, Paul says, “Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many; but, referring to one, “And to your offspring,” which is Christ”. Jesus the Messiah was the one whom God had promised to Abraham those thousands of years before. Such a thing was too wonderful for the human mind to grasp and yet Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. The Jewish Law could not obstruct the fulfillment of that promise. God’s own law could not make his promise forfeit. No, the Torah served to curb and train and convict the Jews until the one faithful Israelite arrived to fulfill the promise made to Abraham. Jesus had come. He had been faithful unto death, even the death on a cross.

But now the faithful one has come and he has broken the chains of sin and removed the power of the Torah to condemn. Paul tells the

Galatians, “Why do you want to go back under Torah? Now that faithful Jesus has come, we are no longer under the babysitter Torah. For in Jesus the Messiah you are all sons of God, through faith.” God had promised Abraham one family. He had gotten it in Jesus. Paul wants to know, “Who are the children of God?” Who is God’s family now that Jesus has arrived? Is it the Jews, marked by the sign of circumcision? If so, then Jesus came and died in vain. For the Jews had been God’s people marked by circumcision before Jesus had come. No, Paul says, there are not many families for Abraham. There are not many peoples of God. There is one family, one people. “For in Jesus the Messiah you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Messiah have put on Messiah. There is neither Jew nor Greek. If you belong to Messiah, you are sons of Abraham, and heir to the promise.”

We knew the answer: there is neither Jew nor Greek. But what was Paul’s question? Who are the children of Abraham and heirs to the promise God made him? The answer is that there cannot ever be a second class citizen in the kingdom of God. Faith and baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection bring the Jew, Greek, Scotsman,

Chinaman, Afghan and African into the bright joys of new creation. It is here among the redeemed, the Church, that we see that the heavenly Father has providentially overcome the power of the fall from grace in Eden and the division of the races at the Tower of Babel. By the faithfulness of Messiah, Jesus the dying and risen lord, the world has been torn from the fingers of death and darkness and has been won for the Father.

Perhaps it would be good to make a clarifying statement regarding what Paul is not saying. Paul can be hard to understand. Paul is not saying to the Galatians that God the Father does not care how people come to him as long as they come. Like that old joke about the people at the revival who sing 14 verses of “Just as I AM” and then leave just as they were. Paul is most certainly stretching the very boundaries of the comprehensible by saying that God had always wanted a family composed of Jews and Gentiles. BUT he is convinced that the true God kept his promises to Jew and Gentile alike IN HIS SON JESUS. IF they will be justified, declared to be his children, citizens of his kingdom, THEN they must be baptized and believe in Jesus.

How do we live into Paul's overwhelming joy that he expresses as he recounts the old divisions as they fall at Jesus' arrival? There is no Jew or Greek; no slave or free; no male or female. First of all we must endure some conviction and shame for the Church today is as divided as it has ever been. Paul's vision of a united nation, a holy people, a royal priesthood has been blurred by the very national, tribal, and ethnic divisions that he described in his letter to the Galatians. Sadly, we have not come too far in 2000 years. The various flavors of Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Pentecostals, Anglicans, Orthodox and Romans stand as sad witness to our failure. We have waged wars against our Christian brothers and sisters by word and deed, and we have not forgiven one another nor sought unity in Jesus our Messiah.

But we may be sure that the Father will not be thwarted by our sins and negligences. If you will pardon another quote from Paul, this time to the Romans, "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" You see it is by the Son and in the Son and through the Son

that we have hope in the goodness of God. If the Father has given us the Son and made us sons in him then there is nothing, not even our own sinfulness, that will keep the Father from winning the victory. And what is that victory? Nothing short of reconciling the whole world to himself. That must be our goal as well. We must join with Paul in that vision of bringing the whole world into the promised inheritance. “For if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.” AMEN