

I want to share with you a quote to get us thinking about the text we are about to read. This quote is from Eugene Peterson. Peterson translated the version of the Bible called The Message. Peterson writes: “When men and women get their hands on religion, one of the first things they often do is turn it into an instrument for controlling others, either putting them or keeping them in their place. The history of such religious manipulation and coercion is long and tedious. It is little wonder that people who have only known religion on such terms experience release or escape from it as freedom. The problem is that the freedom turns out to be short lived.”

Peterson then continues. “Paul of Tarsus was doing his diligent best to add yet another chapter to this dreary history when he was converted by Jesus to something radically and entirely different. He was converted to a free life in God. Through Jesus, Paul learned that God was not an impersonal force to be used to make people behave in certain prescribed ways, but a personal Savior who set us free to live a free life. God did not coerce us from without, but set us free from within.”

If you come from a background in which you were taught that Christianity is about following a certain set of very tight rules, then Paul’s letter to the churches in Galatia is going to offer you a very different interpretation of what the Christian faith is all about. Unfortunately, many folks who were taught that Christianity is a rigid set of do’s and don’ts never make it back into the church. Many folks find Christianity to be a very oppressive experience.

But if you have experienced Christianity as oppressive and controlling in a bad way, then being in church today may be a moment of God’s grace for you. You may be encountering God’s grace because you will now be able to hear a vision of what faith in God is supposed to be about. You are about to hear about God’s freedom in Christ.

We are going to be reading Galatians 2. Galatians is a letter. A letter from a time when people actually wrote real letters and not just text messages or emails. Paul had founded several churches in a region called Galatia. In what we are about to read, Paul has heard about some of what has happened within these churches since he left them. So Paul writes back to them to give them instructions.

We read chapter 1 of Galatians last week and discovered that Paul is not a happy camper at what he has been hearing. He believes that these new Galatian Christians are being led astray by false and misleading teachings. We read more about this conflict in today's passage.

In this morning's reading, we will encounter Barnabus and Titus. Barnabus has been Paul's traveling companion and Titus is one of their early Christian converts. Paul and Barnabus are Jewish Christians and Titus is a non-Jewish Christian or Gentile Christian. There is an argument that erupts in this passage about whether or not one has to abide by the Jewish laws in order to be a Christian. Let's read about what happens.

Read Galatians 2: 1- 14 from "The Message"

Paul is furious with Peter. Paul is furious with Peter because Peter had been eating and hanging out with the Gentiles. But then some fundamentalist Jewish Christians tell Peter that he has to stop doing that. That if he eats with these non-Jewish Gentiles that he is spoiling the Jewish race. And so Peter gives into their demands. Paul's companion Barnabus also follows Peter's example and begins to pull away from eating with the Gentiles as well.

But Paul says that faith in Christ is not about one's ethnicity. It's not about your race. It's not about being with people that are like you. Paul chastises Peter and tells him that being a Christian is not about following the Jewish rules. Paul says that being a Christian is about living into the freedom of Christ.

In 1994 in Rwanda, the Hutu tribe carried out mass murders of the Tutsi tribe. This genocide was chronicled in the award winning film “Hotel Rwanda.” In the town of Ruganga, a group of 13,000 Christians gathered for refuge from the slaughter. This group of Christians included Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, and Baptists. They were both Hutu and Tutsi.

According to one witness, “when the militias came, they ordered the Hutus and the Tutsis to separate themselves by tribe. The people refused and declared that they were all one in Christ. The military officers then lined them all up and shot them all and buried them in a mass grave.”

This act of courage exemplifies what Paul means when he says that being a Christian is more important than being an American, or middle class, or white, or whatever characteristic we may use to describe ourself. Being Christian is a freedom which transcends the ways we separate ourselves.

Some of us have been taught that being a Christian is about following certain rules. Fish on Friday, church worship services on Wednesday or Sunday morning or Sunday night. Some of us have been taught that being a Christian means wearing certain clothes or attending certain schools. Some of us have been taught that Christian means spending a certain amount in prayer and a certain amount of time in study.

All of those things are good things. They all help us grow in our faith if we approach them with the right attitude. But if we approach Christianity as a set of dos and don'ts then we will find ourself feeling frustrated and empty and unable to satisfy all of the requirements.

Read Galatians 2:15-21

As Paul reminds us, being a Christian is about having faith in Christ. And what does faith in Christ look like? Let me share a story about what faith looks like.

A few years ago, there was a newspaper story about a man by the name of Bill Sheridan. In the newspaper article, there were three pictures of Bill Sheridan each with a caption under it. The first picture was Bill and his new seven month old twins standing on the third floor balcony of the apartment along with his wife. Flames of shooting fire and sparkling smoke were behind them. The caption beneath the picture was “throw the child.” The flames were crackling behind them; the parents were almost paralyzed with fear, and someone was shouting to them from below, “Throw the child. Throw the children.”

The next picture in the sequence showed Bill Sheridan throwing his seven month old child into the air, and the caption beneath the picture said, “We will catch them.” The third picture was of the family, mother, father, two infant children, huddled together in safety, with the burning apartment in the background, and they were crying with joy and fear.

There in that moment on the balcony, the parents could not go back to their apartment that was engulfed in flames nor did they like the option in front of them, the railing of a balcony with forty feet below them. But they had to go forward and trust that the ones who said they would be there would not let them down.

Christianity is not about being a follower of rules. Following Christ is having faith that when you are terrified and forced to jump, God will be there somehow.

May we be a community of believers who live not by rigid guidelines but by faith.
AMEN.

-Marquart, Edward, “Sermons from Seattle” and found at
http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/galatians_ibelieve_ibelieve.htm

-Text: Galatians 2

-Given: June 13, 2010 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)