

“Losing Your Religion”

Galatians 1

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Introduction to Epistle Lesson – Galatians 1:11-24

The reading from Galatians starts at chapter 1, verse 11. For various complicated reasons concerning the liturgical year and calendar year and lectionary, we missed the set of readings that have those beginning verses of Galatians, but it's important to know what happens in the first 10 verses. As with all the letters of Paul, Galatians begins with a brief introduction and blessing – ‘the grace and peace of God to you....’ – then in all of the other letters that Paul writes, this is followed by an expression of thanks and appreciation about who he is writing to...but not here. In Galatians, after the opening blessing, comes this: ‘I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel...’ Paul is upset, mad, concerned – he had brought the gospel to the Galatians, but now says they are turning against him and losing their way. And interestingly enough, the conflict is with other Christians – it is with Jewish Christians who followed after Paul and say that Gentiles who become Christians must still follow all the Jewish laws and customs – but Paul says that's not right - that's the conflict. And so Paul feels the need to tell his story to validate his expression of the gospel...

‘Why are you a Christian?’...that’s the first question. ‘What is Christianity?’...that’s the other question... ‘Why are you a Christian?’...’What is Christianity?’...just a couple small questions to tackle for the day! I’m not sure if you ponder such things often, or ever – but by the nature of us all being here today, I think somewhere in your heart and mind you have considered those questions in some way – and it would be interesting to hear an answer from everyone about such things. Maybe you’d even be interested to hear your own answer!

‘Why are you a Christian?’... ‘what is Christianity?’ As you read the opening chapter of Galatians, those are the questions I hear being asked and answered – and I wonder if you can hear those questions/answers echoing there too – that’s what I’d like to listen to/for today. But in a way, this is a strange sort of passage to listen to and preach on – Paul is writing about something so specific to himself and so particular to his relationship with this Galatian community – you might think it interesting history to hear about, this picture of conflict between Paul and his community...or maybe not so interesting - you’ve got enough chances day to day to deal with conflict and you don’t really need to come to church to hear about a 2000 year old squabble. And that’s the thing, our scriptures always take us back through the millennia to hear a story then, listening for how God speaks to our stories now – but what Paul writes to the Galatians, did you think he ever really thought someone would preach a sermon on it?! It’s a very personal letter written

passionately and perhaps even hurriedly – not a carefully crafted theological treatise. And that’s particularly true for the opening section of Galatians – there are many commentators who look past the opening part to Galatians chapter 2 (next week’s reading), and find there and beyond some theological substance to delve into – but the opening chapter is just personal material about Paul – historically interesting but not suitable for theological reflection.

And I would tend to agree with those commentators! It can seem a bit forced to squeeze something meaningful out of these verses – an arid source for a dry sermon! So we’ll see –I figure if nothing else this sermon can leave you grateful that I won’t be preaching again until July...! But this very particular, personal letter does over the centuries become a part of the shared life and meaning of the church, and that’s what makes it Scripture for us; and there are some commentators who in that spirit of a community hearing it’s own story, opened up directions that I found surprisingly fruitful. And what got that flowing for me in hearing Paul’s telling of his own story was reflecting on a particular word Paul uses: “revelation”.

I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; ¹²for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ...

With that in mind, let’s go back to that first question – ‘Why are you a Christian?’ The answer to it depends a lot on how you hear the question – is it

asking how being a Christian is meaningful to you, or is it asking the source of you being a Christian? Do you see what I mean? Is it answering how being a Christian makes sense, or how you came to be a Christian in the first place? They are both valid answers to give, but I would guess that the initial answer most of us would give, in our context, would tend toward that first way of answering...about why Christianity is meaningful and how it has integrity in your life and this world.

‘Why are you a Christian?’...’well, being a Christian gives meaning and purpose to my life and teaches me how to love and serve others...being a Christian gives me forgiveness and healing and hope...being a Christian connects me to a community here and throughout the world and throughout time that seeks to be faithful to God...being a Christian is the way I was given from my family/community, the faith I know as a blessing to me and for others...’ Those are all good answers, don’t you think? An “A” for all of them! Appropriate for graduation Sunday! I could see me and you giving such answers, or something like it – expressing what being a Christian is and how it is lived out with integrity in our lives. And in a culture that sometimes asks you incredulously, “Why in the world are you a Christian?” – it’s an important answer to have.

But if “Why are you a Christian?” is the question Paul is answering in those verses we read – and I think that is the question - then Paul’s answer is different. His answer is: ‘because of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.’ “Why are you a

Christian?’ – ‘because of something God did that intersected with my life.’

Certainly Paul would have had many opportunities to face the incredulous tone of “why in the world are you a Christian?” – but here his answer gets not at the sensibility of the why but the source of the why. ‘I am a Christian first and foremost because of God revealed fully in Jesus Christ’. It’s because of a revelation. Ponder that for a moment – and what it would be like for you to answer that way...and as you ponder, I want to give some reasons why we might think Paul’s answer is not very applicable to us, but then also some reasons that I think it very much is.

There are things about Paul’s experience of revelation that could greatly distance him from us, since what Paul is referring to is a very dramatic conversion that defined his life. He had been a zealous Jew persecuting the early church and then on the road to Damascus had a blinding vision and heard the voice of the Lord Jesus and became a follower of Christ – and not only that but took the lead in spreading the gospel to the Gentiles. Here is this very particular, dramatic experience Paul had, a direct revelation not received from anyone else but given to him in this encounter with the Risen Christ. So, do any of us have anything to do with such an experience of revelation...? Probably not so much; and is Paul telling this story to distinguish himself from everyone else? Well, maybe not so much – I know it’s difficult not to get an air of exclusivity and even superiority from Paul –

I get irritated with Paul throughout his letters with his tendency of bragging while he says he isn't bragging. But Paul's essential purpose here isn't to distinguish himself, it is to distinguish the gospel and what it means to be a Christian, a follower of Christ. What is at stake as Paul deals with these Galatians, is this core gospel question: is it about what we do, or about what God does? Of course those things become very much intertwined in being a Christian, but it makes a big difference where we start. Paul points to revelation - to God's action towards us in Christ - as the place of beginning, and the place to which we must return again and again to ground and center and renew our faith, because it is that starting point that makes being a Christian about gratitude and grace, about relationship and freedom and life.

What Paul describes is the startling truth that life is not a closed system in which we construct our own meaning; no - God is the source of and present within the life and history we inhabit – and to direct our attention to the living God as the source of life is Paul's intention. 'Why am I a Christian?' - I think about resetting, having re-patterned within myself, how my mind and heart responds to that question...to begin with: 'because of Christ; because of God's action, initiative, in the life death and resurrection of Christ; because of the Holy Spirit present to speak that truth in my life' – to begin with 'because there is a God that has reached out in love in Jesus Christ'. When that is the answer I know and feel, I realize that the

revelation to me, my experience, is no less direct or significant than Paul's. It is as much the intersection of my life with Jesus Christ that reveals this truth: being a Christian is about the ways of gratitude and grace – the ways that lead to wholeness and freedom and life. And that's the revelation for each of us.

Which gets at that other question: 'What is Christianity?' Perhaps it seems easy to say as I just did: *the ways of gratitude and grace – the ways that lead to wholeness and freedom and life* – is that just trite? Does that have any substance? Can't anyone just say they've had their own revelation and they've got the right way figured out...? That's certainly one of the challenges Christianity has had from its inception to its many manifestations now, some seemingly unrecognizable from others. But rather than personal revelation leading just to throwing up our hands in corporate confusion, maybe there's an interesting way to at least say what Christianity is not – which is that Christianity is NOT a religion...what do you think of that? Theologian James Alison, in commenting on this passage, says:

...Paul understood very well that, starting from his experience, what was wanted was not the foundation of a new religion...but the preaching of the constancy in our midst of the presence of God as crucified and risen...

I think what that means is that religion is a human structure that will always inevitably point us toward our own power, our own biases, our own fears, our own security – religion usually is or becomes about perpetuating what is until it becomes deadly. That's what Paul found in his religious experience – and although

I don't always resonate with Paul's method or tone, Paul knew what was worth getting upset about because he knew what was at stake. He killed others because of religion...until the revelation of the transforming, changing, disruptive presence of God – the crucified and risen Christ who will not perpetuate or be overcome by the ways of death but reveals and is life.

Saying Christianity is not religion – it's not a way to just trash other religions or our own, since we will always have the structures of religion and there will be meaning and purpose in them – instead it's a way again of resetting, re-patterning our minds and hearts. Because it grounds us in the truth that God is always the one challenging and changing us, always the one uncovering the fissures in the grand constructions of truth we make, always the one tearing down our own security – and doing so because that is what we need to turn again and again to the God who made us, who redeems us, who calls us to life. To say Christianity is not a religion is - to be very Pauline and Reformed about it - to say in a word that it is grace – the gifts of God revealed to us and lived out among us and with all God's children.

'Why are you a Christian?' – God's revelation.

'What is Christianity?' – God's grace.

Those answers are a recipe for losing religion and finding the ways of life.

Amen.