

Galatians 2: 11-21
A Fight In The Church
First Presbyterian Church
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There was a fight going on in the church. And the church was barely 20 years old. In Antioch Jews and Gentiles were eating together at the same table. To understand why this was such a big deal we have to go back before the days of Christianity. The Jews considered themselves as a people specially chosen and blessed by God. And because they had been set apart by God for a special calling they kept themselves separate from other people. They lived separated by rituals, geography, and marriage. But from time to time there would be someone who wanted to become part of their religion who was not a Jew by birth. Gentiles were welcomed into the synagogue and were known as God-fearers. But they were never allowed to forget that they were not Jewish. They could never participate as fully in worship as Jews. And no where was this more evident than in the meals of the community. Jews could not eat with people who were unclean and they could not eat food that was not kosher. So they ate at separate tables using different utensils and eating different food.

After the resurrection Paul began his missionary activity traveling throughout Europe and creating churches. Antioch was one of the first places Paul evangelized. And here Jews and Gentiles had ignored the old barriers and celebrated together the victory of Christ. Meanwhile, in Jerusalem the church is organizing itself under the leadership of Peter and the brother of Jesus, James. And it is decided with good reason that when Gentiles join the developing Christian church that they will have to meet the requirements of Jews. They will have to submit to the holiness code which

governed much of the life of a Jew. In their defense it was the only way they knew to be religious. And it was not unlike some 16 centuries later when the split came between the Roman Catholic church and those we now know as the reformers. They changed what they thought was in error but they kept doctrines, rituals, and understandings that they had learned and accepted as good Catholics.

In Jerusalem they were big on rules and setting up the requirements for inclusion in the people of God. Out in Antioch they didn't pay much attention to such things. And when Peter was in Antioch he became part of that community eating at the same table with Gentiles who had not gone through the process of meeting the requirements established in Jerusalem. That is until a delegation from headquarters arrived to check things out. Then Peter is more concerned with being considered a good Jew than he is with the feelings of the Gentile converts and he reverts to living by the holiness code. And when Barnabas and others see Peter's about face they follow suit. Paul sees this as far more than a squabble about table manners. He understands that what is at stake here is the truth of the gospel. And so he takes Peter and the others from Jerusalem to task.

Now we might skip over this little misunderstanding between the patriarchs of the church if it wasn't still going on in our own day. In every generation and in every denomination since this earliest time there have been those who want to set up prerequisites for membership in the people of God. You can't be a Christian unless you do it in the way we say. And even in the Christian community we tend to elevate some and put down others. There are rules about who can and who cannot receive communion or baptism. There are rules about who can and who cannot serve as elders or officers of the congregation. There are rules about who can and who cannot be

ordained to preach the Gospel. There are rules about what beliefs you have to have and which beliefs you dare not have. At various times in the church we have argued over whether people who aren't the right color can be full members of the church. At other times we have argued about whether people of both genders can be full and equal members of the church. And in our own time the battle still rages over whether only those of one sexual orientation can be members of God's household. Unfortunately, this text is not ancient history. It is still occurring on a regular basis.

In verse 16 it says, "a person is justified through faith in Jesus Christ". We even want to make that the new law. You can't be saved unless you believe in Jesus and more to the point you can't be saved unless you believe just the way we do or the way we say you must believe. We make it all about intellectual assent to a set of humanly devised doctrines. We make it all about our own work at believing. But if you take time to read the footnotes you will notice something quite extraordinary. You will see that an alternative and for many the preferred translation of these verses is not faith in Jesus Christ but the faith of Jesus Christ. The business of prepositions is tricky in the Greek language.

Paul's point is this - we aren't saved by what we do, by who we are, by the specifics of what we believe. We are saved by the work of God in Christ Jesus. It is gift! And it is the work of God. We can't take any of the credit. We are saved not by our own faith but because Jesus was faithful. Faithful even when that wasn't in his own best interest. Faithful even when it brought suffering. Faithful even when it seemed as though God had abandoned him. We are saved because God accepted the faith of Jesus and credited it to our account. The faith we have is a gift of God.

Do you understand how radical that is? Paul was a Pharisee. He took

vows to uphold the law of God. And now here he is saying that the law isn't what saves us. People who heard Paul say that must have gotten whip lash from his about face. Naturally they would doubt his message. The rules that came out of Jerusalem were more to their liking - they gave them something to do, some part to play in their own salvation. And to this day we make up rules. Rules that will let us know that we are in but some others are not. Rules that will allow us to feel good about ourselves. Rules that will give part of the work of salvation into our hands. And we do it, I am convinced, because we simply can't believe that it can be that simple. We don't want it to be that radical. Because, as I was recently told, then everyone will be saved and we can't believe that.

And while we're at it we might as well look at Paul's idea of salvation. In these verses he doesn't say anything about getting into heaven or being saved from hell. What he says is, "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me". To be saved is to let Christ dictate your actions. To be saved is to rise above ego and security and power and wealth and all the other things that dictate the terms of life to us. To be saved is to have the Christ live his life through my body, my mind, my heart. To be saved is to live not bound by rules but governed by love, the love of Christ. The love Christ works into and through me by the gracious presence of the Holy Spirit.

The rallying cry of the Protestant reformation was "sola fide"...by faith alone. It is the principle that we claim is the foundation of the church in our Book of Order. But we find it difficult, almost impossible, to believe that Christ can work the faith we need in our hearts without rules. That was the fight in Antioch and it remains the fight in the church today.

Let us pray.