

Galatians 3: 1-14

First Presbyterian Church

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The radio station in my car is set for KYGO, country music, and KUNC, the local outlet for NPR. Frequently on the NPR station they will report a decision made by the Supreme Court. Not content to just give you the decision and maybe the actual vote of how many justices went which way they usually go into some detail. Nina Totenberg gives you a recreation of the conversation between the justices from the bench. “Justice Scalia said....and then Justice Ginsburg countered...and then Justice Sutter added.” Sometimes its interesting but a lot of the time I find it difficult to follow. Its almost like you would have had to be there to get the idea of the argument.

Our text for this morning is much like that. We are coming in about halfway through Paul’s argument. Some of it we have heard before and some of it will be heard again. Paul’s style of argumentation is confusing to us and add to that the fact that Paul quotes several Old Testament passages and then applies them in ways that raise questions at best and you can see why this particular text is not part of the lectionary readings from the book of Galatians. It’s a part of the book we generally read through in order to get to the good parts. But when I laid out the readings for this series of sermons I thought it might be a good idea to stop and look at these verses a little more closely.

Paul uses the word ‘law’ to mean several different things. Sometimes he wants it to be the moral code by which Israel lived. Sometimes he uses it to mean the holiness code that was part of the Jewish religion. Sometimes he uses it to mean the law of Christ. Sometimes he means the whole

Hebrew Scripture, the Old Testament. But most often he uses the word 'law' to mean the Torah. The Torah is the first five books of the Old Testament along with some of the prophets. The Torah defined the Jewish people. Even when the temple was destroyed, even when they were driven from their land, the Torah remained the center of Israel's life and religion.

The Torah was composed of two parts woven together as anyone who has read the Old Testament knows. There are the stories of the patriarchs and the people. But Torah is also a rule book defining how the people are to live their lives. The rabbis and the Pharisees...and Paul was a Pharisee...tended to interpret the Torah in terms of the legal code. The legal code included the moral issues like the 10 commandments but also the holiness code that dictated how many times a day you should pray, how you should wash your hands, who should be circumcised, etc.

In our text Paul is arguing with the interpretation he has learned as a Pharisee. He is arguing with the overwhelming majority opinion. He is arguing with the leaders of Judaism. He is insisting that Torah must be read and interpreted in terms of the narrative rather than the legal code.

Paul is an educated Jew. He is fluent in Greek but he can also speak Hebrew and Aramaic. He has been trained in classical Greek rhetoric. He is conversant with Greek culture - poetry, sports, and philosophy. He has been influenced by the writings of Plato. And one of the hallmarks of Platonic thought was the dualism of human life. Life and death, light and dark, duty and pleasure and in each dualism one side of the equation brought you closer to God. Human beings were flesh but they were also spirit. And the spirit was superior to the flesh. So here Paul argues that grace is more important than the legal code. He insists, in fact, that Torah must be interpreted in terms of promise rather than prescriptive legal codes.

To prove his point he goes back to the story of Abraham. To the beginning of the story of Abraham. Before the law was given, before circumcision was instituted, even before we are told that Abraham's faith was reckoned as righteousness. He goes back to Genesis chapter 12 verses 1-3, a text that some believe is the interpretive key to our reading of the Bible today. It is the promise made to Abraham and it reads, "Now the Lord said to Abram 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you , and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed". The story of Abraham does not begin with his obedience, his trust, or his faith. It begins with the promise of God. God promises to bless Abraham and to bless all the families of the earth through him. So far Abraham hasn't done anything. It is the promise of God's faithfulness in spite of human faithlessness. In the stories of the people told in Torah that promise was realized time and time again. No matter how often they disobeyed, no matter how much they complained, no matter how desperate the situation God was there to bless them, to deliver them, to move them toward a new place. The story of Abraham was repeated and relived in every generation. They are saved because God is faithful to the promise made to Abraham.

In our own time we no longer argue over the things that Paul argued about. But as Christians we do argue about how the Bible should be interpreted. And just like in Paul's day there are those who would make of the Bible a rule book. A manual that lays down the laws by which we must live if we are to come closer to God. In our time we are less concerned about the holiness code but we are concerned about the moral values. So

there are those who are convinced that the primary purpose of the Bible is the law it contains. And they tend to interpret every part of Scripture in terms of what we should and should not do.

But what if we interpret the Bible in terms of its promise? What if we look at the stories of the Bible and see our own story there? What if we are convinced that God has promised to bless us long before we were able to respond to that promise? That, in fact, is part of the symbolic meaning of baptizing infants - the promise and love of God is poured over and into them before they can realize it or respond to it. God promised to love us even when we did not deserve love. God promised to save us even when we didn't know we were lost. And God was faithful when we were without faith. The Bible is the story of God's faithfulness to the promise God made to Abraham and which applies to "all the families of the earth".

Yesterday we attended the wedding of a friend's daughter. And as at every wedding the young couple made vows of commitment and faithfulness to one another. What determines whether they will keep those vows? A rule book about how marriage must be lived? No. Their love will dictate their faithfulness and the form it takes. Their love will lead them to know what their marriage requires. And their love will provoke a response of love in the other. That is Paul's argument. God acts towards us in love. And that love prompts a response in us. And God's love continues to reach out in promise and blessing even if we do not respond. We live because God is faithful.