

## Out of Many, One

As I mentioned previously, the focus of the Revised Common Lectionary this summer and fall on the shorter letters of St. Paul inspired me to devise my own series covering many of the same passages. We're not following the Lectionary precisely – I started two weeks later because of Camp Sunday and Festival Sunday, so to make up for that I'm dropping the Lectionary's sojourn in the Epistle to the Hebrews (which I do not consider Pauline) and am instead picking up a couple of readings from Titus to follow the letters to Timothy. As the Lectionary suggests, however, I'm starting with Paul's Letter to the Galatians. It's an appropriate place to start as Galatians is the first of these shorter letters in its placement in the New Testament and may also be, as Paul's earliest extant letter, the very earliest-written book of the New Testament. Not all scholars hold to that dating, by the way. Charlie Scalise, for one, has let me know that he doesn't think it holds water and, indeed, the Rev. Dr. Scalise is far more accomplished as a Biblical scholar than I, so perhaps you should heed his opinion. On the other hand, I'm preaching and he's not, so you'll just have to put up with my favorite interpretation of this question.

I'm sorry, did that seem unduly argumentative to you? Perhaps I'm being influenced by the tone that pugnacious Paul sets in this letter in general and in the early part of chapter three in particular. He sets that tone early on, as you may remember, cutting short the gracious greetings that typify formal letters of this period and taking the Galatians to task as early as verse six of chapter one. "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 names the one who has led them astray as accursed and rather heatedly defends his own credentials as a true apostle of Christ in the remainder of chapter one and the first section of chapter two. He relates how he drew the line against the usually beloved Barnabas and even against Peter, one of Jesus' closest friends, branding that worthy as a hypocrite in a very public dispute. After stating his case for grace and faith as overriding the law in a more, well, gracious manner, he apparently goes back on the offensive at the beginning of chapter three.

"You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" Paul writes. "It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? Did you experience so much for nothing? —if it really was for nothing. Well then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?" Paul goes on to repeat his charge of "Accursed" against several groups and individuals. The apostle, it seems, is in a rare old temper!

Or is he? Sometimes, there are layers of meaning to what we say and it can be particularly difficult to interpret tone in writing unless you consider the broader context. Based on what I said earlier about the differing interpretations Charlie Scalise and I have about the setting of this letter, you might have thought that there was a real feud brewing there. But if you know both Charlie and me, know that we've been friends for over twenty years, know the level of mutual respect between us and, perhaps most importantly, know of my own propensity for being a smart aleck, then you'll have picked up on the fact that I was teasing Charlie and pulling your legs at the same time. At least, I hope you did. It reminds me of one of the very earliest lessons I learned from the distinguished teacher of acting, Bobby Lewis. To illustrate the importance of

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understanding context and character in interpreting a written work, Bobby used to like to tell this story: One of the early leaders of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and Lenin's right-hand man was Leon Trotsky. Trotsky disagreed with Stalin on a number of questions and when Stalin became the leader of the Soviet Union, Trotsky was exiled. A number of people tried to quell the disagreements between Trotsky and Stalin for the good of the party and so there was great relief when Trotsky sent a telegram to Stalin which he proceeded to stand up and read before the Politburo. "Comrades," he said, "listen to this. Comrade Trotsky has finally regained his senses! Hear what he sent me in a telegram: You are right and I am wrong STOP You are the true interpreter of Lenin and Marx STOP Excuse me STOP Trotsky." Amid all the back slapping and sighs of relief, one older Politburo member stood to speak. "Excuse me, Comrade Stalin," he said. "I think you are forgetting that Comrade Trotsky comes from a Jewish family. Perhaps you should read the telegram like this: *You* are right and *I* am wrong? STOP *You* are the true interpreter of Lenin and Marx? STOP *Ex-cuse* me STOP Trotsky."

So what if we're dealing with something similar here with Paul? Remember, he's writing to a church he founded, to people he knew well and cared for deeply. The late Dr. Douglas Adams, who was Professor of Christianity and the Arts at Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley until his passing three years ago, proposed that if we follow Paul's use of the word "accursed" in Galatians, we can actually tease out the good-natured irony he's using here to make his point. I'd like to replicate a classroom exercise that helps illustrate this idea that Dr. Adams details in his book, The Prostitute in the Family Tree: Discovering Humor and Irony in the Bible. I'll need some volunteers. I need someone to be the leader of the Judaizers (that's the Jewish Christian party that was trying to convince the Galatians they needed to follow the whole Jewish Law to be good Christians). I need somebody to be Peter and somebody to be Jesus. I'll be Paul. The rest of you will be the Galatians. Now, I'm going to read the parts of Galatians when Paul says that people are accursed or that they did something really awful. When I do, I want that person or persons to come stand up front here by the door and everybody point at that person and say "Curse him," OK? Ready?

"If anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!"

"You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it." Hey, look, we're in the same boat.

"But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned..." How do you feel now that you're in the same corner with Peter and Paul? Wait, it gets better.

"For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law." OK, is there anybody besides Jesus who managed to obey all the things in the law? Come on down, everybody.

"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"" Hey, look, Jesus is here with us! I guess we're all OK after all! OK, everybody back to your seats.

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Now, I can't say that I'm 100% convinced that Paul's got his tongue this far into his cheek in this whole letter but Adams' approach certainly reminds us of some important things. First, none of us is really able to be justified under the Law – none of us can claim to have kept the Law perfectly. Second, that means that we're really all in the same boat – there's no sense in sticking up our noses at somebody because we think we're somehow better than they are. Under the Law, we all stand condemned as outside of God's will. But third, in Jesus, we see God standing in solidarity with us, taking our cursedness upon Godself and leaving us free and clear.

For Paul, this state of grace, this unearned forgiveness from God, is always tied to faith, to our belief that God loves us and to our willingness to do our best to follow God's path no matter how absurd it may look in the eyes of the world. As an exemplar of this kind of faith, Paul reminds the Galatians in chapter three about the story of Abraham. He reminds them of how, in Genesis 15:6, after God promised Abraham descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, Abraham "believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." This was good news for them, Paul says, because God went on to twice promise Abraham, "all the nations (or Gentiles) shall be blessed in you." As Elisabeth Johnson, pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Watertown, Minnesota, writes in an article on this passage, "Paul views these verses as evidence that God planned from the beginning to justify the Gentiles by faith, and 'declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham.' 'For this reason,' Paul asserts, 'those who believe are justified with Abraham who believed.'" Paul goes on to point out what we saw in our exercise earlier; no one can truly claim to be justified under the law

This leaves the Galatians with the question as to why the Law had been given to Moses and Paul anticipates their query. "Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made..." In Paul's view, the Law was given to help human beings understand just how far they had wandered from a healthy relationship with their Creator, to spell out for them what exactly sin was. In the reading for this morning, he calls the Law "our disciplinarian," that is, our guide that shows us where we have gone wrong, until Christ, Abraham's true heir in faith, came to give us a more excellent way. Elisabeth Johnson writes, "While sin has been in the world since Adam and Eve, the law defined sin and made it known as such. The law served a custodial function with the authority to restrain sin, yet lacked the power to liberate us from sin. So Paul writes that 'before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed.'" As he would describe his earlier life in his letter to the Philippians, Paul had been, "A Hebrew of the Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee." As one who had so zealously protected the Law that he not only strove to live his whole life according to its dictates but also was ready to kill those who did not, Paul recognizes now that he had been trapped, imprisoned by the Law. Only in Christ has he found true freedom.

The word Paul uses in verse 24 which is translated as "disciplinarian" was παιδαγωγος, a word which has come down to us as "pedagogue" or "teacher." In Græco-Roman society, however, a παιδαγωγος was a different person than a schoolteacher. The παιδαγωγος was a slave, generally an older male no longer able to do hard labor, who was assigned to a boy child to make sure he got to school safely and without slipping off to play hooky, leaving him in the care of the real teacher and then returning him home, making sure he behaved well there. The παιδαγωγος

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was responsible for the boy's discipline and punishment could be harsh. Most boys longed for the day that they would be considered adults and could escape the often-despised παιδαγωγός. For Paul, the Law's usefulness also ended as someone reached the maturity of faith in God to be found in Christ. Craig Koester of Luther Seminary writes, "(Paul) says that the law was a pedagogue that "confined" people and kept them under "restraint" until Christ came. But now that Christ had come, these children had been set free. The doors are open; the final bell of the school year has rung. Why would a child want to spend summer vacation sitting in study hall? Why would a Christian want to go back to confinement under the law?"

Part of Paul's astonishment over the temptation of the Galatians to buy into the idea that they must follow the Law to be truly righteous was that by doing so they would automatically make themselves second-class members of the Jewish faith. Even as converts, they would carry the stigma of their Gentile birth. There is a famous prayer recorded in the Babylonian Talmud which observant Jewish men used as part of their morning prayers, thanking God that they had not been created a Gentile, a slave or a woman. Although the Babylonian Talmud was not fully committed to writing until about A.D. 500, its contents were established parts of the oral tradition for centuries before, so while we cannot be certain that Paul knew this prayer, it is certainly likely. In any case, the categories of Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, were deeply engrained in the Scriptures as well as in society. Every good Jew knew which side of those dividing lines was the side they wanted to be on. Paul's assertion that "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus," is a radical one indeed. The world is still trying to catch up to his idea that societal dividing lines disappear when seen in the "blessed Gospel Light," the Light of the World that is Jesus and His faithfulness.

Today, we are celebrating the anniversary of America's independence from England. July 4 is the date that the Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence. "We hold these truths to be self-evident," Thomas Jefferson wrote, "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." It is a noble statement and worth celebrating. But Jefferson and his colleagues fell short of the vision that Paul transmitted to the Galatians. Jefferson wrote "that all men are created equal," but he did not include women, nor did deal with the fact that he himself was a slave-owner, depriving other men and women of their unalienable rights, granted by the Creator, to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. For the men of the Continental Congress, the dividing lines of gender, slavery, and race were still in full force. When the Great Seal of the United States was forged in 1776, it included the Latin words, *E Pluribus Unum*, "Out of many, one," celebrating the union of the thirteen disparate colonies. As the United States has grown and changed, people have often celebrated that motto as a sign of our diversity. One cartoonist's idyllic vision of how different peoples come together in America is on the cover of our bulletin this morning. But we do not always reach that ideal. Many is not all. For some Americans, the dividing line of race or national origin is still strong. There is still too much truth in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who wrote in his Letter from the Birmingham Jail, that 11 a.m. on Sunday is the most segregated hour in America. For some Americans, how much money you make or how much formal education you received will still rank you in their world. If you think the dividing line of gender has disappeared, pick up the latest issue of *Sojourners* and read about Sara VanScoy, an MD and psychiatrist who went back to school after 11 years in the Air Force

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to earn a master of divinity with highest honors only to find that no church in her denomination would hire her as a pastor. “It’s sad, really, that the only place in my entire life that I have experienced gender discrimination is in the church,” she says. Or go online and look at the surveys that continue to be published showing that women still make less money for the same job than men. By these things we show that we are still bound to some law, not even the Law of Moses, but the terrible and unthinking law of fallen human nature, the frightened, fearful evidence of how far we have wandered from God. Only by the faithfulness of Jesus and the grace of our Loving Father do we find release from the bonds of that law.

Our national seal says, “Out of many, one.” Paul wrote, “all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” In the words of the hymnist Brian Wren, we are “the new community of love.” As a symbol of that new community, of our oneness in Christ, we come together each month as Christians do all over the world and have through the ages to celebrate Communion. Because we are the children of God, the spiritual offspring of Abraham, the joint-heirs with Christ to the Kingdom of God, let us come together with joy.