



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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The Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity: New Creation!

Galatians 6:11-18

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We all know the experience of working hard to make something nice. Maybe it was all the time you invested in it. Maybe it was all the money you invested in it. Maybe it was all the emotion you invested in it. But it was so nice. And you were so happy about it. Maybe you were even proud of it. And all it takes is thirty seconds for someone else to come along, undo all your hard work, and to make a mess of it all. My parents painted the house and before the paint was even dry, my sister and I ran down the hallway with crayons on the wall. You pour your heart and your expertise into building a business, then you retire and the people who take over run it into the ground. It's even harder when we're talking about people. A few months ago I was talking with a pastor friend. Decades ago he worked with a group of people to plant a church. He loved those people and faithfully shepherded them for years and they were a thriving gospel-centred church. I know he was happy to see them thriving in the gospel from afar in the years after he left them. But the last couple of years were painful. The church got a new pastor who did not have the same gospel commitments. He had capitulated to the culture, especially on issues of sexuality. People left. Earlier this year he tried to take what was left of the church into a more liberal jurisdiction and the whole thing imploded and the church is gone. I think my pastor friend has shed many tears over the situation.

Paul was in that sort of position when he wrote his letter to the churches in Galatia. He had travelled through

Galatia, proclaiming the good news about Jesus in A.D. 47 or 48. People there, both Jews and gentiles, heard and believed, they were baptised in Jesus, and pretty soon Paul was helping them to establish churches. He spent time with them, he preached the good news, he disciplined, he helped them find leaders for the churches. Now it's about a year later. He's back in Antioch or maybe on his way to Jerusalem, and he starts hearing reports of what's going on in the Galatian churches. It wasn't good. Some other people had come to them in those intervening months. We have to read between the lines a bit to figure out who those people were, but it sounds like missionaries, probably from Jerusalem. And those missionaries had led the Galatian Christians to compromise the gospel. Faith in Jesus wasn't enough, they claimed. Faith wasn't, for them, the key thing that marks out the people of God. Obedience to *torah*, to the Jewish law, that, they said, is what marks out the people of God—so, yes, believe in Jesus, but if you're a gentile, you'll also have to be circumcised. I fully expect that Paul wept when he heard this. And he tried to correct them, but they wouldn't listen. And so, in his letter to them that we have in the New Testament, we get a real sense of the tension as he writes. He was hurt. He didn't know how they would respond. It doesn't have the usual friendly greetings that are in his other letters. It's very to-the-point and it gives us a sense of his frustration. And this really comes through in his closing words, which we read for our Epistle this morning: Galatians 6:11-18.

It starts in verse 11 with with what might seem like an odd thing to say:

See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.

In the First Century most people were illiterate, or at best, barely literate. If you wanted to send someone a letter, you hired a scribe to write it down for you. But even a literate person like

Paul would use a scribe to write his letters. It's a bit like being able to hand-write a letter today, but typing it instead to ensure it looks neat and professional. The scribe would write down the letter in his impeccable script, then Paul would write a personal bit at the very end in his own hand. And that's what he does here, but instead of the usual personal greetings, he summarises and reiterates his gospel message to them again, this time in his own imperfect hand-writing. It was that important. Even as he's made his argument through the letter, he can't just leave it at that. What matters above all—and it's the heart of his argument, but just in case they missed it—what matters above all is the cross of Jesus.

There are all sorts of things in the world that differentiate and divide us. We divide the world up into nationalities. We divide the world up by ethnicity and race and language. We divide the world up by our politics. We divide ourselves up by our economics...by status, by colour, by culture, by language, by our likes and by our dislikes, by what we eat and what we don't eat, by whether you're a man or a woman—and now even by what we think a man or a woman is. Paul grew up in and was steep in a culture where the vital distinction was whether you were a Jew or a gentile, but after his encounter with the risen Jesus, Paul realised that the great division—the one thing that not only divides the Church from the world, but that divides those who are willing to count the cost of following Jesus and those who are not, what marks out that great divide is the cross of Jesus. Some of those other things that divide us matter, some don't, some are just plain silly, but at the end of the day the one thing that really does matter, the one thing that divides the human race into two distinct groups is the cross of Jesus. Look at what Paul writes in those big, clumsy letters of his in verse 12:

It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.

What was going on? And what did whether or not these gentile believers in Galatia were circumcised have to do with whether or not these “missionaries” were persecuted? This was before the time of Roman persecution. The problem was the Jews. Paul writes earlier in the letter about his own past as a persecutor of the Church and he has implied that the present problem is similar. Again, we have to do a little bit of historic research to get behind all of this, but what was most likely happening was that the predominantly Jewish Church in Jerusalem was coming under pressure from a rising tide of Jewish nationalism. The Zealots were on the rise. Eventually they’d revolt against the Romans and trigger the judgement that Jesus had prophesied. In the meantime, the Jewish Christians were coming under fire for associating with uncircumcised gentiles. There probably wasn’t much of that going on in Judea, but word was getting back about these churches popping up around the empire, many of them full of gentiles and this didn’t make the Jesus movement look good in the eyes of unbelieving Jews. So “missionaries” were being sent out from Jerusalem to get these gentile believers straightened out—which meant getting them circumcised and, therefore, basically making them Jewish converts—so that they would look more respectable to people like the Zealots back in Judea.

It was dumb. The problem for people like the Zealots wasn’t really the gentiles, it was the gospel. But when trouble, persecution, and opposition face the Church, there are, sadly, always some folks who think that if we compromise on whatever the problem issue is, we can placate our enemies. In this case, unbelieving Jews were upset at the inclusion of

unclean gentiles in the mostly Jewish church, so they thought they could solve the problem by, even if only superficially, they first made those gentiles into Jewish converts. But this undermines the gospel, because the gospel isn’t just good news for Jews. It’s good news that by its very nature makes the distinction between Jews and gentiles obsolete. In trying to placate non-believers, these folks were losing that good news, that gospel.

If anyone understood the awfulness of persecution for the sake of the cross of Jesus, Paul understood it. Think of the list he would go on to write in 2 Corinthians 11:

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:24-28)

Plenty of that lay in his future, but already, Paul knew what it meant to count the cost of discipleship and when we read that list written a few years later we see that he was no hypocrite when he called the Galatians to count the cost. He also knew how foolish this insistence on circumcision was. After all, Paul had been a Pharisee—and not just any Pharisee, but one of the greatest and a member of the Sanhedrin. Paul knew what it meant to keep the law. As he’d write years later to the Philippian Church, when he was a Pharisee, he had been blameless before the law. And that’s just it. Circumcision makes sense—at

least after a fashion—if you intend to keep the whole law. But that’s not what these Judaising missionaries were demanding the gentiles do. They didn’t expect these gentiles to actually keep the law. It was all for show. And it wasn’t even for the benefit of these gentile brothers. It was for their own benefit. “We need you Greeks to cut off your foreskins so that our own skins will be safe back in Jerusalem.” And so Paul rebukes them:

For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh.

And that’s the other thing. It’s not just the hypocrisy involved, but that these folks will go back to Jerusalem and boast about the converts they’ve made. They’ll try to make the Zealots think that Church is really all about making Jewish converts of the gentiles. The Zealots would never have believed it, but these folks were willing to try in the hopes of avoiding persecution. And where is faith in that? I think Paul makes a subtle but important point here. He writes about keeping the law, which he wrote earlier is and always has been about faith. And he knows that these folks are going to end up boasting about all the guys they got circumcised amongst the gentiles...but boasting always stands opposed to faith. Boasting is about what we’ve done. Faith is about what God has done through Jesus and the cross. He goes on in verse 14:

But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus the Messiah, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. (Galatians 6:14-15)

Paul had been captivated by the gospel. Here was a man who could boast about his accomplishments. A Hebrew of Hebrews and a Pharisee of Pharisees. But in light of the cross, it

was all nothing. No Jew had ever had any reason to boast. The Lord's covenant had always been about mercy and grace and it was there in the scriptures all along. Jeremiah had written centuries before, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord" (Jeremiah 9:24). But the cross drew this truth out for Paul. The cross is God's work, not ours, and to boast in the cross of Jesus is to acknowledge that nothing we can do will ever lead anywhere but death. Our faith, our confidence can only ever rest in the grace of God who gave himself for the life of the world. And, of course, the cross where Jesus gave his life for the sake of his sinful and rebellious people, for the very people crying out for his death, that cross is the central act of God's grace.

Paul wrote earlier in the letter that if we are in Jesus—if we have identified with him by faith—we have been crucified with him. So not only has Jesus been crucified. And not only have *we* been crucified with him. But now Paul goes so far as to say that the world—the *kosmos*—has been crucified with him. Jesus took this fallen, broken, sin- and death-filled world to the cross. It was crucified with him. Pontius Pilate thought he was sentencing Jesus of Nazareth to death that first Good Friday, but in fact it was sin and death that stood under that sentence. The old cosmos died that day and when Jesus rose from the grave, God's new creation was born. It's not done yet. It's not consummated. But it's been inaugurated and like yeast, it is making its way through this world and bringing transformation as the gospel spreads and as God's Spirit works in his people. And so Paul can boast that his old self died with Jesus on the cross along with the rest of the world, not because of anything he had done, but despite him and only because of the glorious grace of God. Those old division—like the Jew-gentile divide that so concerned those Jewish believers in Jerusalem—those old divisions no longer matter in light of

the cross, because the old world has been crucified with Jesus and God's new creation has begun. The sentence structure in Paul's Greek—which our translations smooths over—is telling. He writes that "neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision"...and then he just breaks off and blurts out "new creation!" He does the same thing in 2 Corinthians 5:17. "So if anyone is in the Messiah—new creation! Everything old has passed away, everything has become new." He lays out the old divisions and distinctions and then just sort of shouts over the top of them "New creation!" Those things just don't matter any more.

Brothers and Sisters, *new creation!* Remember that. These folks were getting bogged down in something that no longer mattered—and it was undermining the cross, the very thing, the most important thing!, that does matter and it's like Paul just shouts over the top of their argument: *new creation!* It's his way of sort of dramatically reminding them (and us) what matters and what doesn't. God's new creation was born that first Easter morning and it continues in every one of Jesus' people through the life that God's own Spirit gives us, and it will go on—Paul stresses this in Romans 8—it will go on until the whole creation is one day set free from its bondage to share in the freedom of God's children. The life of the Spirit is the down payment, the earnest, the foretaste today of that future day and that future day will come as Jesus' people go out into the world to proclaim the cross and its transforming and life-giving power—God's new creation.

That—at least in part—is why this was such a big issue for Paul. It wasn't just that the cross is the most important thing ever; it's that the message of the cross as the most important thing ever and its power to transform the world is dependent on us living the life of the Spirit in faith and proclaiming to the world that the cross

of Jesus is the most important thing ever. Brothers and Sisters, if we let other things get in the way of that—the way these folks let their fear of the Jews and this irrelevant matter of circumcision take centre stage—if we do that, it undermines our very ability to be the people God has made us in Jesus and it undermines our gospel mission. This is why those churches that capitulate to the culture around them always and inevitably become irrelevant, dwindle, and eventually die.

This is why Paul is always taking his readers back to Jesus and the cross. This is why we need always to be brought back to Jesus and the cross. This is why our liturgy brings us back to Jesus and the cross. This is why we celebrate and eat the Lord's Supper every Sunday. Because Jesus and his cross are everything. It's how the world is set to rights and how each of us is born anew. New creation! And yet somehow we forget. And so we need Jesus and his cross always before us, because you just can't see Jesus and his cross and at the same time hold onto the things of the world that were crucified with him at the cross. Years later Paul would write to the Ephesians:

He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. (Ephesians 2:15-16)

What sets apart the Jew from the gentile and the gentile from the Jew no longer matters. What matters is the cross, by which God has unleashed his mercy and grace into the world and through which he invites us all to share in his promise of forgiveness and of being set to rights and of living in his presence.

Then he writes in verse 17:

And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

Paul closes with a very Jewish benediction for those who have been listening and who take all of this to heart. Peace and mercy. Hebrew blessings announced *shalom* and *chesed*. One later synagogue benediction goes this way, “Bestow peace, happiness and blessing, grace and loving-kindness and mercy upon us and upon all Israel, your people.” Paul’s not-so-subtly saying, “If you want to be part of the people of Israel, if you want to know the Lord’s blessings—his peace and mercy—keep your eyes on the cross of Jesus the Messiah. It’s not about circumcision or Sabbath or any of those other things. By Jesus, his death and resurrection, God has created a new people for himself.

Brothers and Sisters, keep Jesus and the cross before your eyes, at the centre of your faith, and let him be the hope you proclaim. Nothing else ultimately matters. Do not be distracted and do not be tempted to compromise the message. Circumcision is no longer an issue for us, but there are plenty of others. We’re tempted to water down or to compromise the gospel in other ways. Our culture likes to think that it’s not what you believe that matters, but simply that you’re sincere. The gospel confronts that with the exclusivity of Jesus and reminds us that he is what matters. Our culture tells us that we are what’s important and that we are enough in and of ourselves, but the gospel confronts that and reminds us that nothing we can be or do is ever enough and it’s Jesus who matters above all else. Our culture calls us to invest in a million things, and the gospel confronts us with the fact that Jesus is what matters and that God has given our time and our talent and our treasure for his glory. Our culture insists that we can do whatever we want, but the gospel confronts us with

a call to holiness and purity, reminding us that in Jesus and the Spirit we are part of God’s new creation. And that may be the best way to look at all of this: new creation. The gospel is God’s promise to set this broken world to rights and by the gospel he makes us part of that new creation—and it’s his new creation, it exists on his terms, he defines what is good and true and beautiful, not the world and not the people who stand opposed to Jesus and his cross and who sneer at the promises of the gospel.

And that brings us to Paul’s final note. He writes:

From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.

Let “no one”, not meaning the world, but these people who claim to belong to Jesus. Paul knew that the world would be out to get him, because he would never compromise his proclamation of the good news of Jesus and the cross. That was to be expected, because he knew he was challenging the systems and the values, the kings and the gods of the old world, and he knew they would fight back. Paul was martyred some fifteen years later at Rome. He knew first-hand the cost of discipleship and his body showed it. Scars from stoning and beating and all the other abuse he took for the sake of the gospel. He knew the cost of discipleship. He never compromised. He knew that to domesticate the gospel to the culture was to lose its power to give life, was to strip it of its promise of hope. He never watered down the message, because he knew that above all things, what really matters, the one thing that is the only hope this world has, is the cross of Jesus the Messiah. Brothers and Sisters, may the same always be true of us.

Let’s pray: Keep, O Lord, your Church, with your perpetual mercy;

and, because without you our human frailty cannot but fall, keep us ever by your help from all things hurtful, and lead us to all things profitable to our salvation; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*