

“Fighting Words” – Stephanie Wing, 6.13.10

Have you ever accidentally walked into a fight? A while ago we were visiting my sister and brother-in-law. One of them innocently asked me a question, which I innocently answered. I don't remember what the question was, but one turned victoriously to the other and said, "See? I told you so!" I tried to back-pedal a little bit, but it was too late. Has that ever happened to you?

It's easy for us to read our passage from Galatians today and not recognize that we are stepping into a fight. They don't sound like fighting words, do they? We might hold the early leaders of the church on a pretty high pedestal, but as we see, they had their share of disagreements, and it wasn't always pretty. Of all Paul's letters, this letter to the Galatians is the most passionate. In this letter, “anger has caused Paul to say what he really thinks,” according to Raymond E. Brown, a prominent New Testament scholar.

The tone is different from the start. The letter opens abruptly: "Paul an apostle - sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father." Paul asserts that his authority is directly from God through Jesus Christ. Paul's other letters open with a traditional greeting in which he gives thanks to God for the members of the church. But in this letter, Paul skips right over any thanksgiving and instead says: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ."

Paul is hurt by reports that this church has turned against him and his teaching, and he lets them know it. When Paul first went to Galatia and shared with those Gentiles the good news of Jesus Christ, they treated him like an angel. They listened to his teachings, and they became followers of Jesus. However, there were other teachers who came behind him, who told the Galatians that Paul had only given them part of the story, and that his teaching was incomplete. After all, they said, Paul never knew Jesus in the flesh, not like Peter and James. They undermined Paul's authority and criticized his teaching behind his back, planting seeds of dissent among the seeds of the gospel that Paul had sewn. We all know that if good news travels fast, gossip spreads like wildfire, and it isn't long before Paul hears about what is being said behind his back.

The opening chapter and a half of this letter is Paul's defense of his call to ministry and his authority to teach. He reminds the Galatians of his dramatic conversion. He reminds them of his missionary journeys, of those who have received the Spirit and come to believe in Jesus Christ through his work. He reminds them that Peter, James and John, the recognized pillars of the early church, had also validated Paul's call and ministry to the Gentiles.

We might tend to think of “the early Christian Church” as one singular identity, but in reality, there was diversity among the early Christian communities from the very beginning. For the most part, that was ok. The leaders in Jerusalem

decided that the gospel was wide enough to include this variety. While some teachers stressed prophecies and Jesus' teachings, others stressed the duties to serve the poor and sick. We see similar diversity in our churches today. We have a variety of churches that have very different styles, different points of emphasis in ministry, but for the most part, we all co-exist, work together, and sometimes agree to disagree, satisfied that we worship the same triune God.

One major point of disagreement in the early church regarded Gentiles who became followers of Christ. Did they have to convert to Judaism first? Should Gentile converts to Christianity be forced to undergo circumcision as a sign of their inclusion in God's covenant with Abraham? Some said yes, others said no. The disagreement became more intense. It seems that Peter – who, if you'll remember, had the vision of the “unclean” animals being lowered from heaven, symbolizing that Jesus' ministry should be extended to all - was coming under pressure to separate himself from the Gentiles. Paul saw this and confronted Peter at Antioch - calling him out in front of the other leaders for turning his back on Gentiles, and by extension, on the gospel and Jesus Christ.

This is the argument into which we step in our lectionary passage today. Paul is not just upset because people have been talking behind his back. He knows that if his desire was simply to please people, he was in the wrong line of work. Paul is more upset because there are prominent leaders of the church, including

Peter, who he feels are using the law and religious traditions to exclude people from the community of Christ, which Paul sees as completely against the gospel.

Paul takes this opportunity to remind those leaders and the believers in Galatia of the good news of the gospel. Humanity is justified through Jesus Christ alone. Justification means that we are made right with God, despite our sinfulness. On our own, we are hopeless sinners, but the free gift of grace that is given to all through Jesus Christ is the promise of reconciliation with God and with each other. We will be judged as righteous not because of anything that we do or don't do, but only through the grace of Jesus Christ. Our sins are forgiven, and we are welcomed as God's own children.

God's grace is all that we need. Paul argues against other leaders who are saying that grace AND the law are necessary. The law in and of itself is not evil, but to make following the law necessary for our salvation is basically to say that Christ died for nothing. If there is good news in the death of Jesus Christ, it is that once and for all, sin has been conquered, and we receive God's free gifts of grace and forgiveness, ONLY because of Jesus Christ.

These days, circumcision for young Christian boys is a matter of parental discretion. We don't argue about whether or not we need to follow the Jewish law in order to be a Christian. But in what other ways do we exclude from our

community those who love Jesus Christ, but practice their faith differently than we do? How do we exclude those who disagree with us?

In some ways, we live in a context similar to that of Paul, where we have agreed to disagree with other Christians. We have our different churches, our different forms of church government, our different styles of worship, and our different kinds of preaching and leadership. That diversity can be a good thing. No single church can be all things to all people, and having many churches, if we can work together and get along, can enable us to carry out Christ's mission to more people in more ways.

Still, I think Paul would have a few words to say to us today. Paul wasn't saying that everything in the Jewish tradition should be thrown out; he was saying that it wasn't necessary for salvation. Following traditions that have been handed down, following the polity of our church and denomination, and even following moral guidelines for behavior, are all fine and good, but if our traditions or our rules begin to restrict the message of God's free grace, then we are in grave error.

The confrontation between Peter and Paul happened at Antioch, which was a social and cultural melting pot of their day. Things were changing too quickly for some, and among the Jews as well as the Jewish Christians, there was an urge to cling more tightly to the old rules and traditions, to guard the purity of their religious observance. We can understand this anxiety, can't we? In many ways,

we live in Antioch today. Even in a small town like Harrodsburg, there is greater diversity now than there ever has been. Things are changing, times are changing, but the gospel message remains the same. People still need to hear that good news. We still need to hear that good news.

Today's lectionary reading from the Gospel gives us one of the most beautiful scenes of grace enacted. Jesus is eating at the home of Simon, a Pharisee, and a woman – an unnamed, uninvited guest – crashes the party. She brings a costly jar of perfumed ointment. Back before 401(k)s and IRAs, this would have been like a retirement nest egg, her life savings. In a scene that crosses many social boundaries, she washes Jesus' feet with her tears and her loose hair, and then anoints his feet with the costly oil. This woman's extravagant response captures the beauty of God's forgiveness and grace through Jesus Christ. Words cannot capture it, and rules and traditions cannot reign in the wild extravagance of God's amazing grace.

When we are living by God's grace, we will do things that raise some eyebrows. We might be caught eating at the wrong lunch table – the one where the loners, the outcasts, or the socially awkward sit. Or perhaps we'll risk an unpopular comment because it is the right thing to say. Maybe we'll risk being late for something because we took a few extra minutes to talk to someone in need. Our whole lives are governed by rules – written and unwritten. We live by those

rules, and sometimes we break them. But God's grace is completely apart from our carefully constructed rules and traditions. God's grace can work through our rules and structures, but often grace comes and shakes things up. Sometimes, it even offends us, like the woman who crashed a party, let down her hair, and wept while kissing Jesus' feet.

We have no control over God's grace – there is nothing that we can do to earn it, nothing we can do to sway God's desire to give it freely. Grace alone is sufficient for our salvation. Grace is not bought or earned, only given. But with everything in life, we want to keep things under control. Why else would we have a “Book of Order” for our church? Being crucified with Christ, as Paul talks about, means dying to the ways in which we grasp for control. When we stop trying to grasp so hard, we can open our hands, to receive the new life that comes through the grace of Jesus Christ. Are we ready to break the rules, unclench our hands, and like the woman whose many sins were forgiven, take what is most precious to us to pour at God's feet? Only then will we live into the abundance of God's grace, which is all we really need.