

New Life

Galatians 1:11-24

3rd Sunday after Pentecost - June 5, 2016

The Rev. Dr. Ritva H. Williams

[**SLIDE 26**] The theme of our Scripture lessons this morning is new life. Psalm 30 is a song of praise and thanksgiving by one who has gone from security and prosperity to near death and has been delivered by God. I can picture the widow in our Gospel lesson singing this song after Jesus restored her only son to her — you have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy!



The excerpt from Paul's letter to the Galatians is also about new life — the life changing reality of being in Christ. [**STEP 1**] Paul, the most influential Christ-follower who never laid eyes on the earthly Jesus, shares his faith story to order to encourage his readers in Galatia (modern Turkey) to examine their own experiences. He writes,



“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. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors (v. 13-14).

Here's the thing, when Paul persecuted the followers of Jesus, he was was a pious and devout man convinced he was doing God's will. Paul was raised and educated as a Pharisee. This meant even though he was layman he adopted a strict lifestyle of priestly purity in order to be holy enough to commune with God in everyday life. To achieve this holiness required separating himself from anything or anyone that was not holy, pure and clean. That's what the word *Pharisee* means — one who separates himself.¹ The Pharisees built synagogues and schools to teach their fellow Jews this lifestyle of holiness that required not just observing the purity laws but also avoiding contact with anything or anyone that might pollute them or their communities — including other Jews who didn't measure up as well as persons of other ethnic and religious groups.

¹ “The Pharisees” at www.jewishencyclopedia.com

We often judge the Pharisees harshly, but let us remember that their lifestyle of purity and holiness was adopted as a way to survive in a world where Jews were a small minority and often targets of persecution. They were trying to faithfully preserve what Paul calls the traditions of his ancestors.

Paul confesses that he was more zealous in his pursuit of holiness and purity than his fellow Pharisees of the same age. So it should be no surprise that he was deeply offended by the followers of Jesus. Here were fellow Jews proclaiming that a crucified man — a man who was by biblical definition cursed by God — was the Messiah and Son of God.² These Christ-followers not only ate with unclean hands, they ate whatever was put in front of them. They worked on the Sabbath, welcomed lepers, tax collectors, sinners of all types, women of dubious background, Samaritans and Gentiles of all sorts. They told stories about how Jesus praised a pagan Roman soldier as a man of faith! Paul was so offended and enraged by the success of the Jesus movement that he became a religious terrorist!³ He actively tried to destroy the church, hunting down Christ's followers, and encouraging the lynching of Stephen, for whom our church is named.

But then he was apprehended by the risen Christ in a blazing flash of light on the Damascus Road (Acts 9). Through this experience, the blindness and healing that followed, Paul came to understand that Christ was calling him to be his apostle and messenger to the Gentiles — to the very people he regarded as impure and unclean. This was not easy news for Paul to hear. He spent three years in the Arabian desert re-thinking everything he knew about God, the Bible and the traditions of Israel. Even then, he visited Cephas (Peter) and James, the brother of Jesus in Jerusalem before setting out to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ among the Gentiles of Syria and Cilicia.

What is absolutely priceless about Paul's letter to the Galatian churches, is that he is addressing a situation in which other Christ-followers have arrived and are telling folks they have to adopt a lifestyle of holiness and purity in order to be saved. Do you see the irony? These followers of Jesus were teaching the same things that Paul had been so fanatical about 20 years earlier.

Paul's response is "No! No! No! This is not the way of Jesus. You can't get right with God by strictly observing all those purity rules, and separating yourself from anyone or anything that is unclean. The Bible tells us that the righteous live by faith (Galatians 3:6). Jesus showed the world what it means to live by faith. Jesus showed us what loyalty to God looks like. Jesus showed us what trusting God looks like. We are called to be imitators of Christ, walking in the way of Jesus. In baptism, Paul says, we die and are raised to new life in Christ (Romans 6:3-4). We are united with Christ, clothed with Christ, embraced by Christ who claims us as children of

² See Galatians 3:13; Genesis 12:3; Deuteronomy 27:15-26 and 28:15-68.

³ A. Katherine Grieb, "The One Who Called You...": Vocation and Leadership in the Pauline Literature," in *Interpretation*, April 2005:157, quoted by Audrey West at http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2883.

God (Galatians 3:34). At the Lord's table we share the body and blood of Christ, becoming one body of Christ visible in the world (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). In Christ we are no longer Jews or Gentiles, slaves or free, males and females (Galatians 3:28).

[STEP 2] In Christ no one is judged by ancient purity laws, because, as Paul says, in Christ nothing and no one is unclean (Romans 14:14). In Christ we are all saints, we are all holy. As one of my favorite theologians sums it up, “holiness ... is not a lifestyle; it is a neighborhood. We live there because God bought the property and moved us in.”⁴



Too many believers today try to prove the sincerity and depth of their religious commitments by engaging in what one writer describes as “overt bigotry, cruelty, and sheer stupidity, spewing hate at gays, peddling junk science, blowing themselves up, or coddling state power.”⁵ All you have to do is turn on the news to see evidence of this kind of behavior. Paul's faith journey shows us that authentic spiritual transformation moves in a totally different direction. In stead of separating himself, Paul went and lived among the very people he once thought were unclean, walking alongside and ministering to them. Living among people he once despised, Paul's previous death-dealing lifestyle of religious fanaticism, hate filled speech and violent aggression began to die out. **[STEP 3]** He tells the churches of Galatia, “the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). The persecutor of the church became the apostle of love, teaching Christ's followers to pursue love above all else(1 Corinthians 14:1) because in Christ — in this neighborhood of holiness that God purchased and moved us into — the only thing that counts is faith working through love (Galatians 5:6).



What a beautiful new life! Thanks be to God for the life-changing power of God's love!

⁴ Rolf A. Jacobson, *Crazy Talk: A Not-So-Stuff Dictionary of Theological Terms*, Augsburg Books, 2008:86.

⁵ Daniel B. Clendenin, “Paul's ‘Previous Way of Life’: From Violent Aggression to Indiscriminate Love” for Sunday June 10, 2007 available at <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20070604JJ.shtml>.