

Good of All**Galatians 6:(1-6) 7-16**

Paul was writing this letter, probably his very first, to a group of churches in Galatia, which were having a similar problem. They lived in a region of the world that had been dominated by pagan religions. These religions were an amalgamation of Judaism, Emperor worship, mysticism, demonic magic, spiritualism and a pantheon of many other gods. By faith in Jesus Christ, they were transferred out of the kingdom of darkness and brought into the kingdom of God's light. They heard the gospel through the preaching of Paul and Barnabas. They confessed their sins and accepted the grace and liberty that comes through the knowledge of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But now, as we heard in last week's sermon, they were told by Jews, even Christian-Jews from Jerusalem that they must be circumcised and follow the Law. They had sought to understand, even to obey their instructions, but their teaching seemed to lead back to a life of bondage. The Galatians found that following the Law was only a source of spiritual frustration. The Law did not produce spirituality, but even seemed to be a stumbling block. They read this letter from their spiritual father, Paul, so that they might know how to live a Christian life in the freedom of the grace and liberty of the gospel. They wanted to walk by faith, not the flesh. They wanted to live in the freedom of the Spirit and not in the bondage of the Law.¹

Paul has come to the conclusion of his letter. He summarized the arguments he made earlier; the relations between circumcision and law, Spirit and flesh, and individual responsibility and corporate concern are all captured in it. After trying to reason with I think Paul has to just give them a list of rules to live by because he realizes that they are not mature enough to handle the freedom in which they are called to live. So, having strongly argued against circumcision (5:2-12), Paul concludes that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything (6:15). Having argued for the priority of God's gift of freedom-shaped grace (5:1),

¹ Introductory notes on Galatians by Dr. John A. McLean 2001.

Paul writes that we will reap whatever we sow (6:7). Having argued that the Spirit provides the clearest testimony to the truth of his words (1:10-12), he points to the marks on his own body as evidence to that truth (4:12-14). Having suggested that his adversaries should just go castrate themselves (5:12), he argues that those who are detected in a transgression should be restored in a spirit of gentleness (6:1). We are not bound by the law, but should fulfill the law. We should "work for the good of all," and "especially for those of the family of faith" (6:10). The new creation has come, and yet we wait for it. (**Mark Douglas**) This all sounds very strange, but that's the way it is, and it confusing to mature Christians, so we can only imagine how confusing it is to new Christian. For us and them, sometimes it is just better to give us a list of what to do until we are mature enough to hear more. We know we are to live in community and live in peace and harmony...so how do we do this when there are so many differences. Paul says do the things that make for peace. Do to others what you want them to do for you! If something will benefit all...do that!

J. William Harkins tells the story of a small mountain Episcopal parish where he developed and taught a course on lay pastoral care, designed to equip laypersons with theory and skills in pastoral care and to empower them to use these skills in community—both in the church and beyond. He said they began carefully with the theological summons of our baptismal covenant, in which they promise to "seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself ... striving for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being."

In the beginning, enthusiasm for the class was wonderful and inspiring. Together they began to imagine the possibilities for the harvest that might follow their seasons of learning about grief counseling, visitation in hospitals, continuous care facilities, and care for the chronically ill—possibilities like elder care, a "casserole patrol" as a form of crisis ministry, lay member taking the Lord Supper to those who were ill, and other forms of pastoral care. By summer, they proposed the new ministry of lay pastoral care, which was accepted. New life in community suddenly existed where none had previously been, in the service of "bearing one another's burdens." They were delighted.

Soon, however, problems began to emerge. Some became worried about best practices and methodology, others about who among them had the best and most appropriate gifts and graces for particular forms of ministry and why. Opinions about overlapping forms of care and responsibility began to overtake the implementation of the very practice we were seeking to engage. Some began to justify their qualifications for particular tasks, emphasizing their spiritual gifts. Even the clergy staff began to disagree about what the laity should and should not be "allowed" to do. Feelings were hurt. Persons were becoming preoccupied with the letter of the "law," rather than the spirit of compassionate life in community we sought to embody. Their communal efforts at bearing one another's burdens were becoming a burden to them all.

In these verses from Galatians Paul assiduously avoids being critical of individuals in the church, even as he offers practical instructions on life in community—indeed, life in *Christian* community, based not on the law of Moses but on the spirit of the Messiah. In the midst of the crisis of the young church in Galatia, Paul encourages self-giving in faithful service, gratitude, and humility, rather than arrogance and emphasis on differences based on spiritual gifts and graces. For Paul, life in community should be governed by faithful stewardship of *all* resources, a stewardship marked by "sowing to the Spirit" (v. 8), rather than the flesh. Of course, in this case Paul was speaking to those for whom circumcision had become the most important outward and visible sign of membership in community. This can be extended, however, to all those emphases to which the flesh is heir, including our human tendency to engage in sowing pride, spiritual arrogance, division, and other "nettlesome" forms of behavior whose harvest of nettles is its own reward.

Late in the summer following the formation of the lay pastoral care ministry, one of the founding members was unexpectedly stricken ill. She had a life-threatening heart attack; she was resuscitated and kept alive by CPR until the plane returned from London to New York. She was stabilized in hospital there and eventually returned to a lengthy convalescence at home in the mountains. Somehow, this crisis in the community provided the occasion for the original vision of the lay pastoral care ministry to emerge around her care. The various

committees sprang into action without emphasis on who should do what or why. Gifts and abilities seemed to sort themselves and come to life. Tasks were delegated and carried out with enthusiasm and faithfulness. A spirit of grace prevailed. The care ministry thrives to this day. Compassion and practical pastoral ministry transcends law and invokes grace in action, joy in the spirit. It respects the dignity of all human beings. In this spirit, bearing one another's burdens with grace is not burdensome slavery but freedom in Christ. (**J. William Harkins**)

This scripture reminds me of a book: All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten:

All I Really Need To Know I Learned In Kindergarten²

by **Robert Fulghum**

- an excerpt from the book, All I Really Need To Know I Learned in Kindergarten

All I really need to know I learned in kindergarten.
ALL I REALLY NEED TO KNOW about how to live and what to do
and how to be I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not
at the top of the graduate-school mountain, but there in the
sandpile at Sunday School. These are the things I learned:

Share everything.

Play fair.

Don't hit people.

Put things back where you found them.

Clean up your own mess.

Don't take things that aren't yours.

Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.

Wash your hands before you eat.

Flush.

² © Robert Fulghum, 1990.

Found in Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need To Know I Learned In Kindergarten*, Villard Books: New York, 1990, page 6-7.

Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.

Live a balanced life - learn some and think some
and draw and paint and sing and dance and play
and work every day some.

Take a nap every afternoon.

When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic,
hold hands, and stick together.

Be aware of wonder.

Remember the little seed in the styrofoam cup:
The roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody
really knows how or why, but we are all like that.

Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even
the little seed in the Styrofoam cup - they all die.
So do we.

And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books
and the first word you learned - the biggest
word of all - LOOK.

Everything you need to know is in there somewhere.
The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation.
Ecology and politics and equality and sane living.

I think the reason that this came to my mind was that I spent Thursday and Friday with my sons George and Isaac, daughter-in-law Samara, and 3-year-old grandson Gabriel. We had a wonderful time at Crystal where Isaac is working for the summer at the Disciples camp and retreat center where many of us have learned and relaxed. Gabriel was naturally the center of our attention and often he reminded me of our scripture. Gabriel is easily distracted, cranky when he is tired and unreasonable when he wanted his own way. Samara and George often try to reason with him, but many times you have to remember he is three and just give him the rules! My prayer is that we will grow to Christian maturity and learn to live in the freedom to which God has called us.

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).