

Today we are traveling with Paul to another community - Galatia - and he is upset again, but this time its not with the people in that particular community, its with Peter.

Paul thought that he and Peter and the other leaders in Jerusalem had an understanding. New gentile converts did not need to become Jewish in order to be a believer in Christ. We just talked about this a few weeks ago. But apparently Peter had started to feel quite a bit of pressure from other people about what exactly gentiles *did* have to do in order to be like them, a follower of Jesus, and he started to cave. And now Paul is fuming.

So Paul pens this letter to the Galatians hoping to clear up any confusion they may be experiencing. And in order to get them to understand what Paul is going to say, he has to remind them of who he is. He was someone who was working his way through the religious hierarchy. He was advancing, but God interrupted all of that with a different plan. One that God had in mind since Paul's birth - even if he had no idea - to take the Good News to the gentiles, like those in Galatia and beyond. Jesus showed up, struck him blind, and did a mighty work in his life to make this call known, and now there is no going back.

Which seems to be Paul's big gripe with Peter - he's going back. Back to what he knows. Back to claiming that the law is good and a necessary part of salvation. And Paul is having none of it.

Paul is saying there can be no *buts* or *ands* when it comes to the salvation of Jesus Christ. You can't say that you are saved by grace *and* the law. Or that God's good news is for all *but* you need to become Jewish in order to truly accept it. No, Paul is saying that we are not converted or changed or called by the law - but by Christ alone. So we need to figure out what that actually means.

When I lead pre-marital counseling, one of the things that I tell couples is that if you are entering into this marriage thinking that you are going to change your finance when they become your spouse, you need to stop and take time to examine that thought. Because we cannot change other people. Yet, that seems to be how Paul is portraying Peter's process - if people come to know Jesus then we can change them into good Jews.

But for Paul, the only person who can change anyone is Jesus Christ, and he isn't looking for people to become good Jewish people. Honestly, Jesus isn't even looking for us to become good Christina people - because Christ wasn't looking to form a religion. Instead, he is looking for people to be changed in heart and soul and mind, so that they can follow him and be part of proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God.

And friends, we still struggle with all of this today.

It's how we arrived at the belief that people need to be good before they can enter a church. And that they need to enter a church before they come to know Christ.

How many of you have ever had someone say to you that they can't come to worship because the church would come tumbling down? While folks are trying to brush it off in a funny way, they are really saying that I don't have it all together to be a part of you. Because somehow we have conveyed the fact that as followers of Christ we have it all together, when really we are broken people who have been set free by Christ's gift.

And because we have been set free, Paul says that we live by faith.

And we get confused by this as well.

After you have been part of a church community for a while, we just start throwing around these words, some of which Paul lifts up in today's scripture passage, but in reality, we may not even fully understand what they mean. But we don't stop and ask or unpack them, because we assume that everyone else already knows or are on the same page. As a result, we have this weighty words that have lost their meaning because we have never claimed their power.

Case in point - faith. Paul isn't super clear here about what he means by faith. But he is clear why we can have faith - because we have been liberated by the love of Christ. Faith is what replaces sin as that which propels us forward everyday.

For Paul, faith is the priority because it points us to the Good News of Jesus. And he's upset with Peter because it seems like he is replacing faith is customs and codes - a list of dos and don'ts, instead of talking about the life changing nature of grace.

I once had a teacher who asked us what it means to *be* a follower of Jesus. A few folks started by talking about doctrine - beliefs about Christ. And the teacher stopped them and said, that's what you believe, I'm asking who you are. Then some other folks started in with the dos and don'ts of Christian behavior. And once again she stopped them and said that's how you act, I'm asking who you are in Christ.

It went on like this for a while until we got down to the fact that it's about Jesus. Never Jesus *and* something else. In terms of today's scripture lesson, Paul would say, like my teacher to Peter, it can't be Jesus *and* the law. It's just Jesus.

If we haven't figured this out in our own lives as followers of Jesus is it any wonder that other folks think its more about belief or actions than Christ. Because often we talk a lot more about the do's and don'ts then the fact that Christ died for us. Period.

Paul is trying to say to Peter, and the Galatians by extension, please stop confusing folks. You can't have it both ways. And I'm always going to choose grace. I'm going to choose pointing the Gospel of grace and why it is good news. I'm going to point to the fact that my life bears witness to the fact that I've been set free in order to follow this call Jesus put on my life. How about you? What do you choose Peter? What are you standing upon?

In many ways that is the same question for us today, is it not? What do we choose? What do we stand upon? Is it our behavior? Or our beliefs? Or is it Jesus? And what are we communicating with other people? Because, as Paul reminds us, this Jesus movement - isn't about us. It's about him. But by his grace he is calling us to be a part of it. Are we willing to be set free to *be* a follower of Christ alone. Amen.