

Isaiah 65:1-9; Psalm 22:19-28;
Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

The Christian Church in Galatia was under attack – but not from any outside forces. They weren't being attacked by the Roman Empire. They were not being attacked by pagan gods. They were being attacked by their very own believers. There were some believers, converts from Judaism, who were proclaiming a mixed message. First, they were saying that Jesus is the messiah, the savior, the Christ. But they were also saying that, even so, we still must follow the law, the Torah, the law of Moses.

Now these believers were influential, and very persuasive. So much so that even Peter, Peter who had seen the vision on the rooftop of Simon the Tanner, who had seen the sheet come down from heaven filled with every kind of food, both acceptable and unacceptable; and had heard the voice say, "Go and eat", which meant that not only were all these foods now acceptable, but so were all people acceptable – even Peter was persuaded, to the point that when he came to Antioch, instead of going to eat with the Gentile believers, like he had been doing, he excluded himself from those folks and ate only with the believers who came from the Jewish heritage, those who continued to follow the Hebraic law, even though they proclaimed Jesus as Christ. Now Paul called Peter onto the carpet and read him the riot act. Peter got his faith back together.

But to some degree, those folks who were claiming that the law was right have a little bit of correctness. The Torah, the Law of Moses, those 500 plus rules and regulations, serve a couple of purposes. They do help us in our daily lives to know how to live with one another, how to get along. For where indeed, would we be without rules and regulations of some kind? Without them, there would be total chaos. But the law was also there to point out to us that we are sinful, and therefore, without God's grace, we are doomed. Now, somewhere along the several hundred years of use, the people began to believe more in the power of the law, and began to overlook the power of God.

In our daily lives, we need rules and regulations. We have traffic laws so that not everyone is zipping around, doing exactly what they want to do. The law, the Torah is similar in that respect. It tells us repay your debts; help out those who are in trouble; remember to worship regularly – but on those days when you do worship, it's still okay to go and feed your livestock. There are rules about social etiquette – those whom you may marry, those whom you may not marry; how to treat your servants or employees. And of course, the dietary laws. Many of those we can look back on after twenty-five hundred years or so, and realize that they didn't know about germs; they didn't understand that you have to cook pork all the way through; otherwise you might get a deadly illness. And so those rules were in place, in part, for the health – the physical health, the mental health, and the spiritual health of the people.

But the folks of first century Galatia were forgetting. Those who were attacking the church and striving to get the others to follow them, were blinding themselves to the simple fact, as Paul points out, that the law does not save them. The law does not bring

grace. The law does not bring love. The law does not bring salvation. All of those are what Christ did, and does, bring.

We have a wonderful example of that in our Gospel story this morning. Jesus arrives on a shore, gets out of the boat, happens to land by a cemetery, and there is this man who is racked by demons. Okay – were they really demons, or was the guy an epileptic or schizophrenic? We don't really know. It doesn't matter, though. What matters is that this man was in pain. He was not in his right mind, and Jesus brought him back to sanity. Jesus showed him grace by talking to him. Jesus brought him salvation by healing him. And Jesus showed him love simply by treating him as a human being. Treating this man as a human being, when others treated him as an animal. Treated him as a human being, when others wanted to bind him. Treated him as a human being, by treating him as a human. The law said deal with this man differently. The law said bind him up, cast him away, keep him separate from everyone else. Christ said, He is one of mine.

Now, the nice thing about the law is that it can be very easy. It is so much easier when we're told what to do, what is right and what is wrong. But when Peter saw the sheet . . . when Peter had that vision . . . when Christ died on the cross . . . when Paul said, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free – that opened up salvation to all of us.

And things aren't quite as black or white, right or wrong. There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, for in Christ Jesus we are all children of God through faith. It doesn't matter who our parents are. It doesn't matter what our job is. Our income isn't important, or what our birth language was, in Christ Jesus, we are children of God through faith and therefore there is no longer Jew or Lutheran, Presbyterian or Roman Catholic, mid-stater or westerner, American or Arab. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring.

Throughout the letter to the Galatians, Paul hammers home the point that the promise to Abraham came first. The promise that God gave to Abraham and Sarah, "You shall be my people and I will be your God, and your descendants shall outnumber the stars in the sky." That promise came first. The law came several hundred years later. The law is okay to have, but the promise supersedes the law. Jesus came not in fulfillment of the law, but in fulfillment of that promise. And so, there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, black or white, American or French, or anyone who does not belong to Christ.

Maybe we don't want to hear that, because that means that those people I don't like are also part of the promise. Those folks that I don't get along with, with whom I don't agree politically, those folks from whom I have a different economic standing, those folks who look different than me or smell different than me or speak different than me – they're part of it too. And folks that I don't like, I don't really want to go around and spend a whole lot of time on them, but the problem from my point of view is that God still loves them. Christ died for them. Just as Christ died for me.

For in Christ, we are all children of God. That's a message that I need to be reminded of. It's a message that we all need to hear: Christ loves us, no matter where we go, no matter what we do. Not because of where we go, or what we do, or where we live, or to whom we are married, or how much money we have, or anything else – Christ loves us because we are God's. And that is grace. And God's grace is what we all need.

Amen.

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