

Proper 4C 2013
Galatians 1:1-12

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O God my strength and my redeemer.

I notice the expressions on a few faces changing, waiting to hear what's going to happen and be said in the sermon. Those who have been at St Clement's for a few years know that if I begin a sermon with those words, the topic is going to somehow relate to a serious issue, either in the parish or in the rest of the world. On those particular occasions, I pray that my words will be heard especially as they bring together the issue of the day and its close relationship to the teachings and ministry of Jesus Christ. That's the buzz phrase that communicates a problem of which the community needs address and struggle with almost immediately.

Otherwise, I would say to you, *Please be seated.*

The apostle Paul had a similar technique when he wrote his letters – his epistles – to the churches around the Mediterranean and through Turkey that he had established. Usually his letters started out with greetings, identifying himself as a follower of Jesus, and giving thanks for the community to whom he was addressing the letter.

That doesn't happen in this letter to the people in Galatia. First he establishes his authority – not a human authority, but authority directly from Jesus Christ and God. Then he reminds the people of Galatia who they are and what Jesus did for them.

And then Paul immediately calls them to task for straying from the real Gospel that he taught then to a perverted version of the Gospel. He not looking for their or any other human approval because the Gospel that has taught them is a revelation of Jesus Christ communicated directly to Paul.

The problem here is that they've heard that in order to be true followers of Jesus they must be circumcised and continue to follow the laws of the Jews in order to be justified – to received God's grace. He told them that circumcision is not a requirement of Gentiles to be Christ's followers and that are justified by their faith alone, not by good works. If justification comes through the law and good works, then Christ died for nothing.

Paul is angry and frustrated. His church planting efforts in Galatia have gone awry – its as if the church in Galatia were build on sand instead of a solid foundation. And the people are listening to preaching that takes them away from the teachings, death, and resurrection of Christ. Rather, Jesus and his death and resurrection become little more than events that provide only a tweaking of the Jewish tradition. There is still Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free. That system of separation still exists – the one body in Christ is not on the path that the Galatians are being led down.

Paul would not have made a good Episcopalian. There was very little – if any – wiggle room in his understanding of faith in Christ and how it affected one's life. According to Paul, one accepted the teachings completely and lived them without fail, or one was not a member of the community of followers of Jesus Christ.

Our struggle today concerns who we listen to to understand what Jesus actually did teach and say and do, and how he would want us to interpret the events surrounding his death and resurrection and ascension, and finally how we live into that faith. That has been the struggle of those who have called themselves Christians since the time of Paul – he was there in the very beginning and experienced the first Christian leaders breaking off from his interpretation of the Good News. As we all know, breaking off, splintering, separating, and claiming to have the whole and only truth of God and Jesus Christ have been problems the church has dealt with for over 2000 years. One little group is unhappy with the primary group so the little group breaks away and either starts their own

community or goes to another community where they hear what they want to hear in the way they want to hear it and with no more expectations that have to fit into their busy lives.

I was in a conversation yesterday in which we discussed the strengthening of the foundation of Christian communities so that they would have some degree of sustainability and so that the ministries – the good works of those communities would come out of the faith of the individuals in the community. Rather than morphing into another social service agency, the Christians in these communities would strengthen their own faith and formation so that however they reached out, it would be in the name of Jesus Christ and would be a direct action of their faith. There would be knowledge that for Christians, good works is a direct result of faith – not because it must be but we have such a strong need to live out the faith we have proclaimed ... because we have such a strong need to live out our baptismal covenant.

In this conversation yesterday, we quickly came to the conclusion that in order for Christian communities to be able to live into their faith – and this means each one of the people in that faith community – teaching must be essential to faith formation. We acknowledged that certain topical discussions were important but we also acknowledged that the people in the community have concerns and issues of faith that they specifically would like to address. There was general agreement that without these ongoing discussions and opportunities for faith development and spiritual deepening, sustainability of a Christian community in the 21st century was highly questionable.

Let me submit to you three observations that generally describe my experience with Episcopalians over the past 40 years and watching how even the word *evangelism* is something that causes our hearts to race, our skin to break out in hives, and our hair to fall out. At the very least, we find a way to stay under the rector's radar. Remember – these are generalities.

- First, we don't know what the Good News is nor do we know how to talk about it.
- Second, Episcopalians in general are unable to talk about what it means to be an Episcopalian.
- And third, Episcopalians have so little understanding of our sacred writings and traditions that we are unable to answer even the simplest questions about those sacred writings, beliefs, and traditions.

We love to bring up Richard Hooker's three-legged stool because it includes that component of reason – but if we don't understand scripture and tradition then what is there to reason about? Oh, we can talk in general and do book studies and look at current issues and watch videos, but how are those discussions informed by our sacred writings and tradition? How are they formed by our ritual and Eucharist?

Are we a philosophical community that focuses primarily on reason and that prefers sermons that are warm and fuzzy? Or are we a faith community that focuses on the Good News of Jesus Christ and all that entails, integrating together scripture, tradition, and reason?

There were a couple of situations in my experience as an interim rector that continue to stand out in my memory. Both took place in churches in small villages in upstate New York. In one family, the mother came to me to tell me that her daughter, a middle schooler and budding basketball player, would not be on the team that year. The practices had been scheduled for Sunday mornings. When her mom commented about it being too bad she'd have to miss Sunday School and church, her daughter responded with surprise and indignation – *Mom, God wants us to be in church on Sunday mornings, so I'm not playing basketball this year.* Her mother tried to convince her it was okay to miss church but the young girl stood firm. She was in church for the entire basketball season, and her parents were right there with her on Sunday mornings.

In the other parish, the community athletic organization decided that practices and games would start happening on Sunday mornings. There was too much conflict with the school district's sports schedules. The parents and church leaders were very unhappy about this. After much individual wringing of hands and gnashing of teeth, someone suggested the churches come together and go en masse to the athletic organization and let them know that their children would be in church on Sunday mornings and not playing sports. After a couple of Sundays when the number of children did not make it possible to have full teams, the athletic association found another time to hold their games and practices.

In both cases, choices were made – one by a child and the other by faith communities working together – that demonstrated the place of faith and faith communities in the lives of individuals and the larger community.

We do have choices and we make them based on what is important to each one of us – that's what free will is about. The observations that Episcopalians know so little about our own sacred writings and tradition and are unable to articulate our faith in any coherent way tells us immediately what's important in our lives. The fact that so few Episcopalians take advantage of offerings to develop knowledge in those areas also tells us how little we care about them. And the fact that there are so few requests for more discussions and seminars and gatherings around our Christian Episcopal faith tradition pretty much cinches the observation that deepening our spirituality in the context of our faith tradition is at the lower end of our lists of values and priorities.

I will say that those who actively participate in these offerings get into some thoughtful and exciting discussions and that their faith journeys are significantly affected by talking with and listening to others in the community. I would venture to guess that, with a little training, these folks would actually be quite articulate in sharing who they are as Christians and Episcopalians.

Paul was starting out with a new community of Christians, trying to help them understand how to be a community of followers of Jesus Christ. Christ's teachings and his models of ministry and living together and relationships with others was a new paradigm – one based in love rather than law. We have the advantage of their experience of 2000 years ago and the history of a faith that has developed over the past 2000 years. Calling ourselves Christians with only a Sunday School educational experience is akin to calling ourselves lawyers with only a high school civics class or doctors with only a ninth grade biology class.

As a rector – as the leader of a spiritual community – as many parish clergy would like to know – what will it take to motivate communities to be curious and excited about learning about their faith tradition? What will it take to motivate us to take even an hour or two out of a 168-hour week to deepen our understanding of our faith and the Bible and our tradition. When will priorities at the top half of our list consistently include our faith communities and our own faith formation? Or perhaps we're barking up the wrong tree. But that's another discussion...

Paul was very concerned that the community in Galatia was easily swayed by other voices that were in conflict with his teachings received through Jesus Christ. The community did not yet have a solid foundation to enable them to intelligently and reasonably discuss the differences underlying the conflict. Two thousand years later, we intelligent and reasonable people still do not have the faith foundation that enables us to articulate our beliefs and enter into sustained conversation about the Good News of Jesus Christ.

What do we do about that? Or perhaps even more basically, do we want to do anything about that?

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