

Proper 5C 2013
Galatians 1:11-24

Last Sunday and for the next six Sundays, we'll be reading from 1 Kings, The Letter to the Galatians, and the Gospel of Luke.

We started the letter to the Galatians last week, learning that Paul was very unhappy that the Galatians were so easily swayed by those who preached a Gospel that was not of Jesus. And the Gospel they heard was not the Good News that Jesus had left with his apostles and followers.

Paul's authority comes from a revelation to him by Jesus Christ, not from any human authority. He made that statement in the first half of the first chapter and continues to develop his source of authority in today's passage. He's preaching to relatively new Christians who are still confused about who gets to be in this new Christian group and who is out. Unfortunately, there are some preachers delivering a message of exclusion, insisting on the circumcision and loyalty to Jewish laws in order to be considered a follower of Jesus. In his rather heated letter to the Galatians, Paul states without qualification, that these two requirements are added by those who don't understand what it means to be a Christian. How does Paul know this? Because his conversion experience from one who was a well-known persecutor of Christians to one who became a strident proclaimer of the Good News could only have happened through an encounter with God.¹

How does Paul's claim as a preacher authorized by God translate into the way we identify those who say they are called by God to preach and do other work of the apostles? In the Episcopal Church, individuals who feel they are called to ordained ministry and actually a specific lay ministry are given a discernment committee to work with them. The committee assists them in better articulating their call, the source of that call, and how the call needs to be developed. In the Episcopal Church, the validity of a call to ordained ministry comes from God through God's church in this world. We have so many different Christian denominations, each having its own discernment process, but in the Episcopal Church, it is the discernment committee that helps an individual fill out what it is they are hearing as a call and then challenges them to developing the maturity of that call.

St Clement's currently has one committee that is working with an individual, and two more are about to be formed. The authority for a call to ordained ministry or as a preacher or as a missionary of God's church finds its source in the community of the people of God, who are God's representatives and the community's representatives in the discernment process. And they are the committee that spends what amounts to years on the journey with an individual who is deemed mature and appears to have the potential and commitment to do the difficult work among God's people.

It can be a very long and rocky journey. On the other hand, anything worth receiving, especially from God and God's community is worthy of our commitment, pain, challenges, and our willingness to stay the course.

I mentioned preachers. Preachers must be licensed, in our case, by the bishop of the diocese. They receive or have received a certain level of training before they can preach on any regular basis from a pulpit in the Episcopal Church. And those preachers have worked in their communities to receive the authority of the community as someone who the community feels has the gift for preaching.

¹ Beverly Roberts Gaventa in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C Volume 3, page 115.

A word about the sermons that are preached... The purposes of a sermon are to enlighten, to develop spiritually, to reassure of divine love, to educate in faith, and to challenge the people of God. They are preached to the whole community – at least those who are in church on Sunday mornings or other special services. This preacher does not preach to specific people but rather to the whole community, present or not. Sometimes a sermon hits home and brings with it positive responses from the hearers. Other times a sermon also hits home and I'll hear comments like, "I really needed to hear that," or "That brought back some of my old Catholic guilt," or "I really need to be better – more intentional – about that." The comments I don't hear in the shakeout line are questions like, "Who was she talking about?" or "That was really offensive to me," or "She's preaching to the choir," – metaphorically, of course, or "I don't come here to be challenged; I come here to be comforted."

I can assure you that this preacher does not preach to or at specific people. On the other hand, if something hits home or causes discomfort, then it's time figure out what's going on in your own soul rather than dismissing it as a fault of the preacher.

Other times, I know that the people who are not in church probably need to hear most sermons more than others. But if they're not in church and not sick or out of town, it's the responsibility of the community to call its missing members to encourage them to join the community more regularly on Sunday mornings. They are sorely missed, literally and figuratively. If a priest calls, the person on the other end is either happy that the clergy miss them but tend to feel like they've been called in by the principal. If they're called by a friend, they're happy to know they are missed and love being called by a friend.

If we were to have live streaming of our Sunday services, like some Episcopal churches do, we would have yet one more way to reach out into our community and the wider community. It's something that could easily happen; we just need someone to coordinate that work.

So Paul receives his authority to preach from God; he doesn't check first with humans although he says he does confer with Peter and James the brother of Jesus. But then he goes out as the itinerant preacher and walks the lands around the Mediterranean.

The problem Paul faces with the people of Galatia, however, is that he already laid the ground work for this church and has already developed the authority and relationship that a preacher and leader must with the community. Unfortunately, some came after him, badmouthed him, accused him of preaching a gospel that he actually didn't preach, and began to destroy what had been built up. And the people did not have the solid foundation in their faith to stand up to the challenge. Hear what one commentator says about Paul's situation:

It takes enormous time and energy to initially establish credibility and assert authority with any congregation. Strangers must be won over, suspicions allayed, common ground established, sympathies developed. ...Paul now faces the daunting task of having to do it all over again. Only now the people have been deliberately set against him, new suspicions sown, and new doubts raised. A sermon faithful to the strained dynamics of this text will not shy away from sensitively exploring the delicate inter-relational ties between pastor/preacher and people and the matter of so-called pastoral authority in Paulo's age and ours.²

So Paul must re-establish his authority through his re-telling of his story that lead him to his current position as one of God's apostles, and he must again re-establish his credibility and validity by reminding the community in Galatia of his encounter of and conversion by God.

² Gregory Ledbetter, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C Volume 3, page 115.

The topic from the pulpit must always be some form of the Good News of Jesus Christ – that Jesus came into the world to teach us how to love God and love one another and that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. Since we are all sinners, Jesus Christ came into the world to save the world. How we bring these lessons into our souls and live them in our lives is the difficult part. It's a never ending journey; it's a constant growing edge for every one of us. That's why I put such an emphasis last week on building a stronger foundation in our faith lives by using this community to deepen our faith and spirituality and our ability to reason with our faith tradition. That's apparently the reason for the unhappy chatter last week. But remember no one has ever said being a Christian would be easy and not require intentional effort. On the other hand, Richard Rohr, the Franciscan priest, writer, and retreat leader acknowledges that "Life was much easier on the childhood side of the rainbow,"³ Thus, if we are not intentional about engaging our faith in community conversation, our understanding of God and the responsibilities and obligations of our lives as Christians remain at their Sunday School level. We can "yes, but" all we want, but it is what it is.

So as Paul does in many of his epistle sermons, preachers need to use sermons to not only preach the Good News but educate the congregation in its tradition and reading of scripture. And it's the responsibility of the people in the pews to encourage their fellow Christians to join them in deepening their faith and renewing their spirits by joining us when we gather on Sunday mornings or at other times. In this way of working together, we strengthen our own community as we prepare to share the Good News with others.

Amen.

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June 9, 2013**

³ Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, Jossey Bass Publishers, page 106.

