

## **“No Longer I”**

Meditation on Galatians 2:15–21

June 12, 2016

*We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.*

\*\*\*

Today, we welcome two children into the fold, claiming them for Christ through the waters of baptism. With every baptism, we are asked to “remember with joy our own baptism” --to cherish the vows that were made for us by the Church and our families; to treasure the promise of the Spirit’s work in us.

We are cleansed from sin; we have a new identity--new lives in Him!

Like Kenny and Heather, I wasn't baptized as an infant. I was 13 when I was baptized at Redeemer Lutheran Church in Damascus, Maryland. My dad is Jewish; my mom is a Christian. Before my parents got married, my dad promised my mother's mother, a Norwegian Lutheran, that their children would go to Sunday school and church, but also learn and experience the faith of my father's family. Then, when we were old enough, we would have the freedom to choose what religion we would follow.

Differences between Christianity and Judaism seemed small to me as a child. The God was the same loving, gracious God in both faiths. The Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, as we call it, makes up more than half of the Christian Bible! Unlike Christianity, you are born into the Jewish faith, though Christians may convert to Judaism. Both of Dad's parents were Jewish. Dad's faith didn't require weekly attendance in a house of worship, though other Jews may attend *Shabbat* services every Friday at sundown in a synagogue, along with religious instruction or Hebrew school during the week. Dad sometimes attended the Lutheran church with my mom, brother, sister, and me.

One of the big differences in our faith that I noticed as a child was that my Jewish relatives didn't celebrate Christmas. They didn't have Christmas trees! They didn't prepare for Santa. Dad had always wanted a Christmas tree growing up and hadn't been allowed; so we had a tree every year. Dad was in charge of choosing and decorating it. My Jewish cousins celebrated Hanukkah, with the lighting of candles for 8 days, retelling the story, and exchanging gifts, including gold-foil-wrapped chocolate "gelt" and "dreidels". We sang songs and ate special foods,

such as *latkes*. Sometimes, Dad would take us to the synagogue with his parents on the High Holy days--Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah. Grandma would fast and pray all day, but then prepare enormous meals for the extended family to eat at sundown, beginning with *kneidel* soup, *gefilte* fish, and chopped liver. Grandma always kept a kosher table, making sure not to serve any milk products with meat and never cooking or serving pork or shellfish.

But the most important holiday in the Jewish faith was the Passover or *Pesach*. Passover, a feast of 7 days, is usually celebrated in the home on the first night with a *Seder*-- a worship service around the dining table, with special foods to retell the story. Here is Dad celebrating Passover with his family when he was a little boy. The Passover story was and still is what gives Jewish people their identity, their understanding of who they are in relation to God. They are the people of the exile and return, called to live in obedience to the Gracious God of the Promise, the Almighty, Everlasting Creator of the universe, who knows, forgives, and loves them still.

\*\*\*

Jewish identity and life of faith are important to the understanding of Galatians, which highlights the struggle of the early years of the Church when its membership grows to include Gentiles, many of whom, in addition to being uncircumcised, had very little knowledge of Scripture or Jewish life. They are wrestling with the question of what is necessary to live as a Christian, though many of the Church, particularly the leaders, are still Jewish, raised in the faith since birth. How do they

separate their Jewish identity from their new baptismal identities--as children of the new covenant, crucified yet alive with Christ, who lives inside them?

The letter to the Galatians was particularly inspirational to 15th and 16<sup>th</sup> century reformers, such as Martin Luther, who embraced the letter's message of God's gracious gift of salvation *through faith alone*. In Luther's time, as it was in Paul's, the question on everyone's lips was, "How can I, a sinful person, find acceptance in the eyes of a holy and righteous God?" Paul's answer in Galatians is that we don't have the same identity that we had before! No matter who we were before we knew Christ as our Lord and Savior, we aren't that sinful person anymore--not in God's eyes! We just have to believe this, trust God for this, and walk in this truth-- *that the Son of God who loves us gave his life for us!*

Paul writes, "no longer I, but... Christ." Εγώ (ego) is the Greek word for the pronoun "I," but it is not really needed here. In Greek, like in Spanish, the pronoun is communicated through the verb endings. Εγώ (ego), then, is an "emphatic I". Paul is emphasizing the "I" --the identities that we used to be--the "I's" that we aren't anymore! "*I have been crucified with Christ,*" Paul says, "*and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.*"

The Galatians, living in the Roman province of Galatia in what is now Turkey, have been misled by itinerant missionaries into believing that Gentiles need to be circumcised before they can become the people of God. Leading up to Paul's argument against circumcision, the apostle in chapter 2 tells of a public confrontation with Peter in Antioch, when

Paul calls Peter a hypocrite. Peter had been all for ministry to the Gentiles when the apostles met with James in the Jerusalem church 14 years earlier. But after “certain people came from James” to visit Peter in Antioch, they stopped eating with Gentiles, Paul says, “for fear of the circumcision faction.” Paul continues in 2:14, “But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, ‘If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?’”

In today’s reading, Paul begins by making a distinction between Jews and Gentiles. But of course it’s just a rhetorical device when he refers to himself and other Jewish believers as “Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners.” He is pretending to be on his audience’s side before he persuades them to take his viewpoint, which is that there is “no distinction in Jew or Gentile” in Christ, for “God shows no partiality.” As he later writes in Romans 3:23, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” And in Romans 3:10, “There is no one righteous, not even one.” Paul’s argument against circumcision begins by saying that a person cannot be not “justified” by the “works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.” Are you wondering what he means by “works of the law?” Obviously it means something larger than the Ten Commandments because circumcision isn’t one of the 10! But it’s hard to pin down exactly what Paul means. In the Hebrew Bible, the written “law” is the *Torah*, the first 5 books. Yet Paul isn’t just referring to the *Torah*, either. But to dig more deeply into “works of the law,” rather than the next part of the verse may actually distract us from Paul’s main point, which is to emphasize the importance of faith over “works.” For

our purposes, we can define “works” simply as *any human effort to accomplish our own salvation or to add to what Christ has already done for us through his death on a cross.*

As we look at the second part of the phrase that has been translated “through faith in Jesus Christ,” we find one little word translated “in” that is cause for debate among scholars because it may also be translated “of.” If it is Faith in Christ, this could mean our salvation is based on a human reaction—believing in Christ. The danger is that this could become a work! If it is “Faith of Christ,” this could mean our salvation is based on an action of Christ: Christ’s unflinching faithfulness to the will of God, his obedience unto death. I am more inclined to agree with the scholars who favor the second translation; this would fit Paul’s message of grace! Let us never forget that faith is a human response to God’s gracious deed; it is not a possession to guarantee our status before God; it is God’s gift--so it cannot be a “work!” And there’s no way to “claim” it so as to put God in debt, as if God owes US a special blessing or special care because we believe.

\*\*\*

At 13, though I didn’t fully understand what baptism means, the Lord gave me a new identity. I was *no longer “I”*, for “I” had been crucified with Christ, so that “I” no longer lived, but it is Christ who lives in me.

But my struggle with my baptismal identity--letting go of the “emphatic I”-- will be a struggle my whole life through, just as the Galatians struggled to find their new selves and new lives in Jesus Christ. And you, my friends, may continue to struggle with your

baptismal identities, too. Because there's something inside of us that finds it hard to believe that Christ loves us so much that he gave his life for each one of us and for all of us. And that his gift of faith is all that we need to be forgiven for all our sins, to have new life in Him!

Friends, the essential question for today, as it was for Paul and Luther, is still, "How can I, a sinful person, find acceptance in the eyes of a holy and righteous God?" The answer is still found in God's Word:

"I have been crucified with Christ..." And it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh... I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me ... and gave himself for me.

Let us pray.

Gracious God, we praise you for being the God of all the Universe, who planned from the beginning to send Your Only Son to save us from our sins because we couldn't do anything to make ourselves righteous before you. Thank you for your love and grace, which we struggle to accept; it's so hard to forgive ourselves! Help us to let go of our old, sinful "I's", the "I's" we used to be. Strengthen us to believe in your love and the Spirit's transforming work in us, and to let the life of Jesus shine through us so that all the world may see and know Christ the Lord. In His name we pray. Amen!