

“A New Law”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
May 22, 2016

Galatians 2: 15-21

We live in an ever-increasingly diverse world. Many times, as human beings, we seek out those who are most like ourselves to help us feel safe and secure amid all this diversity. But sometimes, we can also find ourselves in groups that are eclectic and, to an outsider, don't seem to have much in common.

I was with Debbie this week at the national conference of Association of Clinical Pastoral Education, where she received her certificate as an associate supervisor. As an outsider, I commented to her that this was a pretty interesting group of people gathered together – personalities, faiths, cultures, ethnicities, etc. And yet, what unites them all is a calling to provide spiritual care and mentor students in various health care settings, something which each of them do in unique and impactful ways.

Last week, I was in southern Indiana on the annual golf outing that Dave Monesmith organizes. Two things: I am happy to announce that Dave beat me in total score, and I have no intention of revealing what went on. We have a saying: what happens in southern Indiana stays in southern Indiana! But once again this year, I was struck by how diverse and eclectic our group is. Our vocations, our backgrounds, our hometowns – we all come from a huge variety of places. And yet, we are united by our love of golf and our friendship with one another.

I would suggest that even in our safest or most secure settings or groups, we are in the midst of great diversity. Consider our church setting. Most of us are here because we feel comfortable, we know others well, and maybe, we feel that we can “escape” the great diversity of the world. But look around you and consider how truly diverse we are. We may all be connected to this church, but that doesn't mean we all believe exactly the same thing. We may call ourselves Presbyterians, but that doesn't mean we all grew up that way, or even were Christian prior to being in this congregation. Diversity and change are constants in our lives, whether we readily admit it or not.

If that is the case, then how do we address questions such as: What is faith? What do we believe? How do we share your faith? These are the big questions of life, the ones that force us to examine where we stand in relation to our God. They are the questions which we bring with us to church, and which we leave with when we re-enter our lives the rest of the week. They are not easy questions to answer, primarily because they are so personal and unique to each one of us.

But I would argue they are also the questions Paul had in mind when he wrote his letters to churches across the Mediterranean, including the Galatians. The early-church was wrestling with what it meant to be a Christian in the context of the Jewish faith, in a Roman culture, and with their teacher far-removed from them. They struggled day-to-day to know how to define faith and what it meant to them, as they sought to share that faith with a non-Christian world. If that doesn't sound familiar to us today, I'm not sure what would.

Probably the most crucial question the early-church faced was: how should the church treat Jews and Gentiles as part of the Body of Christ? As Paul addresses the Galatians, this issue is at the forefront of his thinking, for he knows they are struggling with who should and should not be welcomed to the table. Paul begins the second chapter of this letter by reminding us that at Jerusalem, Peter and the other apostles had welcomed the mission to the Gentiles, and Paul himself had been extended the right hand of fellowship (2:9). But the church in Antioch is in focus here, and it is a church that has both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Paul notes that before James came to that place, the two groups coexisted fine in the church. However, after James and Cephas (who is Peter) came to Antioch, they brought with them the notion that Jewish Christians should not sit at table with the Gentiles because of the strict Jewish laws of purity. As a result, there is a harsh and momentous argument brewing about who is a part of Christ's Church, and how the law is to be viewed by the Body of Christ.

Paul's argument in this passage is simple: even though he and others may be Jews by birth and not Gentiles, through Christ we are no longer bound by the works of the law. Our salvation comes not from our good works and diligent adherence to the law. Instead, "we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ" (2:16). In his life prior to knowing Christ, Paul persecuted the church, building up barriers of division against God. Now, he refers to that once again: "If I build up the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor" (2:18). In other words, to build walls and obstacles to individuals in the faith is as if one does not believe in Christ to begin with - that is being done under the rules of the "old law," when now a "new law" is in place - the law of grace.

This new law has been placed in each of our hearts through Christ's death and resurrection: "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" (2:19-20). This gift of grace comes not just to Paul, but to the whole church. The Church of Christ is not about Jew or Gentile, it is about being dead to sin, and alive to all that is good. As Beverly Gaventa comments: "For the one who asserts that Christ 'lives in me,' the previous standards of the law - of ethnic pride, of personal

accomplishment, whatever those standards might be – have been swept away. If Christ ‘lives in me,’ then, Christ may also live in all other human beings, regardless of their origin or viewpoints or behavior. To withdraw from fellowship with any of those human beings on the basis of my own individual judgment is fundamentally to misunderstand the gospel of Jesus Christ” (*Texts for Preaching, Year C, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 1994: 388*).

Ultimately, Paul was so passionate about justification for all because the heart of the gospel was at stake. Heidi Armstrong writes: *Justification is what a computer’s word-processing program does to the margins – straightening up the words so they are in right relationship to the page. This is what God does for sinners who are out of line. Messy human lives get straightened out, put in right relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The grace of Jesus Christ makes it happen for all. Jews are justified by grace. Gentiles are justified by grace . . .*

People are not justified by Jesus and the works of the law . . . salvation is never a matter of Jesus and something else: not Jesus and certain cultural practices; not Jesus and a certain spiritual practice or theological perspective; not Jesus and a particular income level; not Jesus and a specific denominational brand; not Jesus and one political party; not Jesus and being good enough. Just Jesus. If anyone or anything else can be said to justify the sinner, the gospel is derailed, and, in the words of Paul’s devastatingly abrupt conclusion: “Christ died for nothing” (2:21).

*Undoubtedly, some (of us) will take into account (our) deeply personal failures, (our) seemingly unforgiveable sin, and struggle with such good news, wondering, “But did Christ die for this, too?” The church’s answer must be an unequivocal, “No! Not for this, too. Christ died for this, period.” No sin is an addendum to the cross. Not stubbornness or stupidity. Not addictions or depression. Not guilt or greed. God’s grace is unconditional. That is why it is called good news! (Heidi Husted Armstrong, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 3, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 134-136*).*

After worship two-and-a-half months ago, a member of the church who I deeply respect came up to me. I had just preached on the parable of the prodigal son. At the conclusion of the message, I said: “Our sin, our brokenness, our pride, our shame – it has all been reconciled by God’s love in Jesus Christ. When we can confess our need for such grace, then we no more may die, granted a second birth as the prodigal received.” This member asked me, with tears in her eyes, “I understand that I’m forgiven by God in Jesus Christ. But how do I forgive myself?”

Her question has stayed with me these several weeks since. For I believe she voiced what so many of us feel. In our heads, we can more easily accept this theological notion that our God has done something

for us in Jesus Christ that no one else could do. And so we affirm that we are justified by his grace, and are reconciled to God through his unconditional love.

But when we come face-to-face with that – in our hearts, in our lives, in our souls – then it becomes something hard, even impossible, to comprehend. “I’m forgiven – even for this? Even for that? How could someone show such love and grace towards me?” And I believe that member’s question to me embodies this tension we encounter in living as justified, reconciled children of God.

If God has forgiven us in Jesus Christ, then that also means we should not only forgive others, but we also should forgive ourselves. For “no sin is an addendum to the cross.” Just as we have been crucified with Christ, as Paul proclaims, now “it is Christ who lives in me” (2:20). And because Christ lives in us, we are given the freedom, the permission, the grace to let go of the burdens of past sin, and be justified in our relationship with God, with Christ, and with one another.

“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” (2:21). May that be our guide as we live faithfully into our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Thanks be to God. Amen.