



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

"Freedom for its Own Sake"

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church
on Sunday August 28th from Galatians 5:1; 13-25*

I have a confession to make to you this morning; a rather embarrassing fact that I've never admitted publicly. I am a barbarian. I know this may not come as a shock to those of you who know me, but I want to be clear, I'm not a metaphorical barbarian. It is not a description of the barbaric way I eat or drink, my hygiene, grooming habits, love of nature, or warlike sensibilities. I'm afraid it's genetic. I have barbarian DNA and the only reason people don't see me as a barbarian is because my barbarous genes have been obscured by thousands of years of history in which my ancestors came to join what scholars called "civilization", but I am the descendent of barbarians, nonetheless. It is who I am, and I need to own it. Some of you may be barbarians as well and not even realize it. My people, and some of your people, sacked the ancient city of Rome in 387 BC conquered its armies, destroyed its buildings, and burned the city to the ground. In 279 BC we attacked the religious and political center of Greek civilization, Apollo at Delphi, but we were defeated at the battle of Thermopylae and our survivors crossed the Aegean Sea and settled in Asia Minor. "Barbarian" is the derogatory name that the Romans gave us, but they also called our people Gauls, and the place our survivors settled was known as Galatia.

We didn't refer to ourselves as Gauls or Galatians just as Native Americans did not call themselves Indians. That's because we were an alliance of many different tribes: Celts, Germani, Franks, and Britons. The Romans used the term "Gaul" or "Galatian" as an umbrella for anyone who lived North of the Alps. In 58 BC our tribes united again to fight against Rome in what is known as *The Gallic Wars*. We were defeated by Julius Caesar who subdued all the territory from the Alps to the British Isles and employed this newfound power to transform Rome from a Republic into an Empire. Two million of our people were killed, a million were enslaved, but even more humiliating the image of our deaths became enshrined in stone for all time. Statues of dying Gauls, or slain Galatians, became the quintessential representation of Roman imperial power and supremacy. Visually, we occupied the Roman imagination as the archetypal enemy, barbarian intruders. Friezes of our brutal deaths were the favorite subject of an entire genre of victory art conveying a single message, the inevitability of unconditional surrender to the Roman Empire. Every Galatian living after the Gallic Wars would have seen images of vanquished and dying relatives emblazoned on the walls of every city as a form of Roman imperial propaganda and must have been a lot like being a Native American and watching a Western.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

Growing up in Church I had no idea that Paul wrote letter to the Galatians, my barbarian ancestors. I never heard anything about the Gauls from Sunday School teachers or pastors who offered lessons on Paul's epistles. I thought Galatia was just another city in Asia Minor. As a young protestant, all I'd ever heard was Luther's interpretation of Galatians which was the bedrock of the Reformation's famous, "justification by faith." Luther transformed Paul's letter into the Magna Carta of a new and narrow understanding of salvation that cemented anti-Jewish theology and completely obscured the history of the Galatian people and their reality as scapegoats of Roman oppression. Luther made Paul's letter into a tool of division by drawing firm battle lines between faith in Christ and Jewish law. A superior Christian (protestant) self was opposed to an inferior other that encompassed not only Jews, but also Catholics, Muslims, and all socioreligious movements from below (i.e., "fanatical sectarians" like the Anabaptists). The Protestant was right, all others wrong. The Protestant was good, all others bad. The Protestant was righteous, all others evil.

By using Paul's letter to create a Jewish other, Luther did exactly what the Romans had done to the Galatians. He turned Paul's language of justification by faith into a polemical treatise against an imagined "enemy of the faith," which allowed the epistle to Galatians to be re-absorbed into the older, pre-Christian pattern of Roman imperial self-justification over and against the non-Christian Other. This letter that Paul originally wrote to a community of barbarians who were vanquished and oppressed by the Roman Empire was morphed into a toxic theology and divisive faith that was employed all over again to vanquish and oppress new groups of human beings, especially the Jewish people.

From barbarians to Jews, to savages, to terrorists—we continue do this to people. We rehearse this ancient pattern—we label people, we name and defame, we otherize, we use derogatory and dehumanizing terms to categorize and denigrate entire groups of human beings. Why? Is it because we think Paul did? There's a lot of bad theology we can lay at the feet of the apostle Paul, but often his words were misinterpreted by figures like Luther to justify Christian supremacy, oppression, and violence. For most Christians today the only Paul we have is the one that Luther gave us, and we can't seem to get away from Luther's interpretation no matter how hard we try, which is why it is no surprise that much of what goes for Christianity in America today often sounds like Paul but in practice it looks a lot more like Luther.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

Scholar Neil Elliot claims, “The usefulness of Paul’s letters to systems of domination and oppression is clear and palpable. Paul has been made an instrument in the legitimatization of oppression...the apostle has been pressed into the service of Death.” It reminds me of Howard Thurman’s grandmother who was raised on a plantation near Madison, FL. Thurman would read the Bible to her two or three times a week, but she was picky about the portions she wanted to hear. The psalms were a must; Isaiah was welcome, so were the Gospel, but never Paul. After years of reading her favorite passages, Thurman finally mustered the temerity to ask his grandmother about her choices, especially why she shunned anything by the Paul. He would never forget what she said. “During the days of slavery,” his grandmother replied, “the master would hold services for the slaves. Old man McGhee was so mean he would not let a Black minister preach and the white minister always used something from Paul. And at least three or four times a year he used the text: ‘Slaves, be obedient to your masters, as to Christ.’ Then he would go on to claim it was God’s will that we were slaves, and if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. So, I promised my Maker if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible.”ⁱ

We all have our reasons for not reading Paul—the way men used his patriarchal words about the “role” of women in the household and church, or how homophobic people wildly misinterpreted his teachings to condemn LGBTQ people, or the way racists used his letters to justify the institution of slavery, white supremacy, and many other forms of evil. But is it not possible there’s another Paul; a more liberatory Paul? Is there a way to recover Paul from the ash heap of Protestant theology and Evangelical history?

For God’s sake, Paul is the one who said in our scripture today, “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” Have we forgotten that Paul was imprisoned by the Roman Empire? According to Acts he caused riots in Jerusalem, an uprising in Thessalonica, and had to be snuck out of Berea in the middle of the night. He was considered an enemy of the state who was eventually arrested and executed. Why did the Roman Empire kill Paul? They didn’t do that to every sectarian Jewish teacher. There were plenty of religious leaders at the time who believed all sorts of things that differed from imperial ideology, yet those individuals didn’t get hung on crosses or have their heads cut off. So, what was it about Paul, that led the state to *crucify* him?



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

In her book *Galatians Re-Imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished*, scholar Brigitte Kahl argues that in the letter to the Galatians, Paul was not setting up a polemic of faith versus law to divide the followers of Jesus from the Judaizers. Instead, she claims that Paul was aligning himself as a follower of the crucified Jesus with the crucified people of the empire—the vanquished barbarian Gauls and trying to distinguish life in the Spirit from the law of the Roman Empire.ⁱⁱ The Gauls were not just archetypal enemies of Rome, but representatives of lawlessness and impiety. However, the

Galatians were now submitting themselves to the laws of Judaism around circumcision which was a way of submitting to the law of Rome. Because of longstanding treaties, the Jewish people were permitted to worship their own God and did not have to participate in Roman imperial worship or cultic practices. However, it was a massive scandal for a non-Jewish person, a Greek or a Gaul, to refrain from worshipping the emperor and the gods of Rome. They would have been accused of lawlessness, impiety, treason and potentially be arrested or crucified. So, to avoid these consequences, Jewish followers of Jesus in Galatia were demanding that their fellow Gentile followers be circumcised so they would be considered as Jews, and by extension, live in good standing as Jews with the laws of Rome.

This act of accommodation to Roman law made Paul furious! He was angrier with the Galatians than any other letter. He did not write a proper introduction or effusive greeting. Instead, he lambasted the Galatians from the outset, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel!” In chapter 3 he said, “You stupid Galatians, who bewitched you?” and even said, “I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!” Now we must admit, this is not the most pastoral letter. But why was Paul so upset? It was not simply the imposition of circumcision or following Jewish law. No, Paul believed the barbarian Gauls were accommodating to the Roman Empire and nullifying their faith in Christ.

The Galatians were allowing the Empire to define their relationships between one another in the church and Paul was adamant they should not allow the Romans to define the followers of Jesus on Rome’s terms. Therefore, he insisted that they relate to each on Christ’s terms and not the Empire’s.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

"There is no longer Jew or Greek," he famous proclaimed, "no longer slave or free, no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." The "stupid" Galatians were not in danger of backsliding into Jewishness, but into the tyranny of Empire, a danger we all face when we allow contemporary imperial structures to organize the way we see each other. Allowing the Empire to define our relationships assures they will be violent because violence is the essence of Empire. So, we must find a different way to see each other and relate to each other.

Throughout our history, the American Empire has operated the same way the Roman Empire did—using epithets and laws to label people, to name and defame individuals, to otherize human beings with derogatory terms that categorize, compartmentalize, and dehumanize entire groups. Our empire has used terms like savages, Indians, pagans, slaves, immigrants, colored, communists, terrorists as modern-day versions of Rome's barbarians. It is, of course, the height of irony that people like me, who the Romans would have called "barbarians" for most of history, have become the new Romans calling everyone who does not look like us barbarians. The crucified of history have become the crucifiers.

One could easily argue that the Romans, and Americans, are the real barbarians, but that's not the point of Paul's letter to the Galatians. Paul's point, and the one we must cling to as followers of Jesus, is this extraordinary gospel truth: there are no barbarians. As Paul said in a letter to the Colossians, "there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian or Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!" There are no barbarians! I'm not sure if you heard me. There are no barbarians! You're not a barbarian and I'm not a barbarian. Yes, I am the descendant of barbarians—but in Christ, there are no barbarians. There are no savages, Indians, pagans, slaves, immigrants, colored, communists, or terrorists—only beloved human beings made in the image of God. But proclaiming this in 1st century Rome, or in 21st century America, is a revolutionary statement that could get you killed!

This is the liberatory Paul I am desperate for all of us to see—for American Christians to embrace, the radical and revolutionary Paul who rejected every Roman epithet and stood against every imperial law of oppression and violence and proclaimed, once and for all, that the Spirit of Christ has set every single one of us free—free from every form of derogatory categorization, denigration, slavery, and evil. Do you believe it? I want us all of us to hear the Paul who talked about love more than all the other authors in the Bible combined and, "the only thing that counts is love," "the whole law is summed up in a single commandment to love your neighbor," "if you are led by the Spirit you are not subject to the law" and "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

There is no law against such things!" There is no law against love! There is no law against joy! There is no law against peace! There is no law against patience or kindness! There is no law against generosity, faithfulness, or self-control! And as people who follow Jesus and Paul, who were both executed by the law, we are not required to subject ourselves to any laws that are not loving, or joy inducing, or peacemaking. If we are led by the Spirit, we are not subject to any law, whether Roman or American, that would harm and oppress us or our neighbors. Which is why, as people of faith, we must transgress any law being proposed, passed, or enforced that seeks to oppress the poor, people of color, women, or the LGBTQ community.

We have been called to freedom—brothers and sisters, male and female, Jew and Greek, barbarian and Scythian, slave and free, young and old, Black and White, poor or rich—all of us have been called to freedom. This means that we must stand against anything that would enslave us or our neighbors, whether it be laws, or Supreme Court rulings, or debt, or the criminal justice system, racial identity, nationality, religion, or even our God. As James Baldwin said, "If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him."ⁱⁱⁱ

There are a lot of people in our country who worship a small, slavish, and hate-filled God. Some of these who claim to be followers of Jesus in our country today are misusing the old Baptist concept of "religious freedom" as a license to discriminate against the marginalized and to enslave everyone to their twisted vision of a Christian society. It has nothing to do with religious liberty but is an attempt to make us all slaves to their extreme ideology.

Paul was quite clear with the Galatians, just as he would be with the hypocritical proponents of religious liberty today—our freedom should not be used as an opportunity for self-indulgence but for love and the building of beloved community. Yes, we are free from imperial categories and laws of oppression and violence, practices of calling people names that tear down, dehumanize, and destroy. But we're not just meant to be free from oppression—we are also meant to be free for love and community. If we only care about what we've been freed from and don't take seriously what we have been freed for then our freedom will become nothing more than an individualistic libertarian nightmare filled with competing forms of violence.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

In *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*, Valarie Kaur (Kor) writes, "'Love' is more than a feeling. Love is a form of sweet labor: fierce, bloody, imperfect, and life-giving—a choice we make over and over again. Love can be taught, modeled, and practiced. This labor engages all our emotions. Joy is the gift of love. Grief is the price of love. Anger protects that which is loved. And when we think we have reached our limit, wonder is the act that returns us to love. When we choose to wonder about people we don't know, when we imagine their lives and listen for their stories, we begin to expand the circle of those we see as part of us. We prepare ourselves to love beyond what evolution requires, [we prepare ourselves to say] 'You are a part of me I do not yet know.'"^{iv}

True freedom begins when we turn toward each other in revolutionary love and begin to wonder. I wonder what the true Paul was really like. I wonder what he was calling the Galatians to be. I wonder what life would be like if there were no Empires. I wonder what life would be like if we really lived like there are no barbarians. I wonder what freedom could possibly mean for me. I wonder what life in the Spirit might feel like. I wonder what our community could be, I wonder what our church could be, and I wonder what America could be if we truly believed that all people are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, and that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I wonder what our world could be if we stopped scapegoating people, if we truly believed in freedom, and if we really lived the gospel truth that there is no law against love. May we move from wonder and worship into the work of joy and peace.

ⁱ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, (Boston: Beacon, 1976).

ⁱⁱ Brigitte Kahl, *Galatians Reimagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).

ⁱⁱⁱ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, (New York: Vintage, 1963).

^{iv} Valarie Kaur, *See No Stranger* (New York: One World, 2020).