

Galatians contains much that is essential to the Christian faith. Most especially it says that salvation comes from faith in Christ not adherence to the Jewish law. At the time this epistle was written this question was a hot button issue. Before, during and after Jesus' earthly ministry, Jews were accepting even recruiting Gentiles from around the Roman Empire as converts to Judaism. These converts were called "proselytes". After the resurrection and Pentecost the question arose as to whether or not gentiles could become "people of the way" directly or whether they had to first convert to Judaism. That question has long since ceased to be of concern. It is simply of historical interest.

The lesson contains material I consider more important. My Jerusalem Bible calls it "Paul's apologia". It is important autobiographical material from Saul of Tarsus. This along with information we find in acts tells us a good deal about Saul of Tarsus as a person and the nature of his spiritual development. And it will tell us something about ourselves as well. That is the eternal nature of the bible. It contains issues that occur over and over again.

Jesus once told a parable about an impulsive young man, probably fueled by mixtures of testosterone and alcohol, who demanded his share of the family inheritance, went off into a far country and wasted it in "riotous living". Impoverished and alone he realized the foolish nature of what he had done. He returned home hoping to find forgiveness and a new life. He was probably like many of us here this morning I call us "garden variety sinners" basically decent people Jewish or Christian seeking a good relationship with god. Sometimes we mess up but overtime we learn and grow in the faith. This has been going on for over 2000 years.

If we look at each of the gospels we find that in each one there is an account of Jesus healing on the Sabbath. According to strict interpretation of the Jewish law this is work, a violation of the Sabbath. Jesu's chief critics, the scribes and Pharisees, criticize him for this, even claiming that he heals by the power of the devil Jesus retorts by warning them of their danger of committing the unforgivable sin, the sin against the Holy Spirit. This happens when an extremely self-righteous person sees an obviously good deed done by someone they disapprove of on religious or moral grounds. They call this good evil. They are unable to see God's hand at work about them anywhere except within their own biases and value system. It is an attitude of arrogance, a step farther along the road to sinfulness than the prodigal son.

Now let's focus on Saul of Tarsus himself. Born in a notable city, a Jew from the tribe of

Benjamin, well educated, seen by his peers and superiors as zealous for the Law of Moses and correspondingly hostile toward detractors, "the people of the way," Jews who see Jesus as the true messiah. All in all Saul of Tarsus is a young man of privilege on the way up. But to gain a contemporary perspective on Saul and the intensity of his ambition let's think of him as an associate of a mafia crime family who wants to be a "made guy," have a crew of his own. In order to do that, he would have to "make his bones," i.e., to kill someone. He was at least an accomplice in the murder of Steven the first Christian martyr.

I am recalling a documentary I recently saw on channel 274 about Osama ben laden. He too was born into privilege, studied diligently avoided riotous living became increasingly devoted to his faith and murderously hostile toward its opponents. There seems to me a hauntingly similar spirit shared

Between Osama ben laden and Saul of Tarsus a vicious murderous spirit, except that ben laden had far more resources with which to express it, a spirit far, far darker than a self-indulgent post adolescent boy or self-righteous scribes and Pharisees shouting epithets.

But something happened to Saul on the road to Damascus, an experience called metanoia, a Greek word that means literally to turn around 180 degrees. If a Greek army training unit was being drilled by their sergeant, and he commanded "metanoia" they would have done an about face. The broader connotation of metanoia is a radical change of attitude or perspective; look at things differently. The change may be voluntary or involuntary. With Saul of Tarsus there is every reason to see it as involuntary! The word metanoia is the one we translate into English as repentance.

On the road to Damascus, Saul was confronted by the risen Christ who rescued him from evil as one might rescue a drowning man from the ocean and hypothermia.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer we say "deliver us from evil". From the time we are born we are warned by others of dangers: as children;" don't play in the street" later on, "fasten your seat belt" still later "beware of identity theft" there are many perils and dangers in the world. But some dangers lurk within ourselves. One of the worst is self-righteousness. And ironically

those most in danger are the most devoutly religious like Saul of Tarsus. They become enamored with perfection, abstract theories, and laws for their own sakes. They seek to live them out not only in their own lives but impose them upon others also. They become very angry with others who do not oblige. Sometimes angry enough to harm or kill. When we are in such a state, we need metanoia, repentance deliverance from evil.

Preached by The Rev. David Cavanagh

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