

2 Kings 5: 1-14; Psalm 30; Galatians 6: 1-16; Luke 10: 1-11, 16-20

Let's go to the movies, shall we? You may remember the movie "Patton," released in 1971, and starring George C. Scott in the title role. In my opinion, his best movie. (Coincidentally, he won the Oscar for best actor that year, but refused to accept the award.) One of my favorite scenes in that movie is when Patton's army is stalled on a road in Italy. They were making good time, but now, out of nowhere, they've come to a complete halt. But here comes Patton, roaring up to the front of the line in his Jeep, to see what the hold-up is. On a one-lane bridge there is a farmer with a donkey cart, and the donkey has chosen this place and time to balk and refuse to go any farther. The Italian farmer and a handful of GIs are pulling, pushing, coaxing, and scolding, but the donkey is resolute. He will not budge, and Patton's entire army is stacked up behind him with nowhere to go.

Quickly sizing up the situation, George C. Scott, as General George S. Patton, jumps out of his jeep, draws one of his pearl-handled pistols, and unceremoniously shoots the donkey dead. He tells the GIs there to throw the donkey off the bridge and pay the Italian farmer for the lost donkey. They comply.

And then Patton says, "I'll be damned if I'll let a jackass delay my invasion of Italy."

In the 1995 Ron Howard movie "Apollo 13," starring Tom Hanks, you may recall that this re-telling of the actual third mission to the moon relates the agonizing story of an accident aboard the space craft that required the mission to the moon be aborted and actually wondered if the three astronauts aboard the Apollo command module could make it back to Earth alive. There were all sorts of problems, and one of them was that the carbon dioxide scrubbers in the command module were beginning to fail. They were not designed to last as long as they now, in the new mission profile, must last. If they cannot remove the carbon dioxide from the air in the module, the astronauts will suffocate. The problem was that the only spare CO2 scrubbers on board the spacecraft were round, and the filter receptacles were square. Something had to be done.

One of my favorite scenes in this movie is when the engineers on the ground take up the challenge to make a round filter fit in a square hole. They go into a conference room, dump on the table everything the astronauts have in the module, and say, "ok, we've got

to tell the guys up there how to make this (the round filter) fit into that (the square receptacle).” They cobbled together a solution that was ingenuity at its best. In true American fashion, it involved duct tape.

Since I am the final preacher in this six-sermon series on Paul’s letter to the Galatians, you might be wondering what these two movies have to do with Paul’s letter to the Galatians.

Quite simply: General Patton, the NASA engineers, and Paul of Tarsus threw the rulebook away and charted a new route through unfamiliar and hostile territory.

I think we’ve probably pretty well covered the basic idea behind this letter of Paul’s: Do the Gentiles in Galatia have to follow Mosaic Law in order to be members of the Christ community? Paul’s answer is, “No, they don’t. The rules don’t apply. The law is irrelevant. What is important is a person’s personal relationship with God. Salvation is with Christ, not the Law.”

We Americans pride ourselves on being a civilized nation of laws. Our Constitution spells out the basics, and our courts have interpreted (for good or ill) how those basic structures apply to our daily lives. Governments at all levels never seem to tire of writing more laws and regulations for us to live by. Let us understand that the ancient Jewish communities also prided themselves on being a nation of laws. They had the Mosaic Law, laid down in the first five books of what we Christians call the Old Testament.

There were something like 613 commandments in the Mosaic Law, governing everything, all aspects of life in the Jewish community. The Mosaic Law contained the Ten Commandments, and also moral laws, purity laws, social laws, food laws (what is clean or unclean, how to cook and store foods), feasts and celebrations, sacrifices and offerings, instructions regarding the Tabernacle and the building of various altars, and then laws for how to choose a king for the nation when the time came.

If you were to inherit property, there was a law for that. If your neighbor owed you money, there was a law for that. If you were wondering how to give a first fruits offering, there was a law for that. If you developed a bald spot on your head or a rash on your body, there was a law for that too. The law was everything.

But Paul writes that the law is immaterial. Neither this way nor that way is anything, he writes. Of course, Paul didn't mean that we were free to run amok and become a gang of criminals. What he meant was that a slavish insistence on doing things in one way and one way only distracted us from the greater idea of drawing closer to God in our own way. Paul says a new creation – a new creation as a living member of the body of Christ – is everything.

One of the things I find interesting in Paul's letter to the Galatians is down there in chapter six, verse eleven. You might want to refer to your bulletin. Perhaps you find it interesting too. There in verse eleven Paul says, "See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand!" In other words, "See how large I write in my own hand."

Apparently Paul dictated his letters to an assistant. Then maybe he added a blessing or signature at the end in his own hand to prove that the letter was from him. But in this instance he feels so strongly about what he wants to say that he takes the quill from his assistant, dips it in the inkwell, and writes in extra large letters the crux of his message. "May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ," he says. "The law is not anything, but a new creation is everything." He can let his assistants write his story for him most other times, but when it comes to this, he feels he must write it for himself. He writes large in his own hand.

Organized, complex societies exist only because they have a extensive body of rules, laws, and codes of conduct to define how we shall live. To get along in a complex society, we find we must make thousands of decisions, perhaps hundreds a day. These decisions are really only choices from the lists presented to us. Where shall we live, where shall we work, what kind of work shall we do, what's for dinner and when shall we eat it are choices we make from the many options open to us. We build the story of our lives much like choosing from a vast smorgasbord of choices. But most of the story of our lives is written by others, by the rules that define the options. It is rare to be able to tell a story that is unique in itself. Very few times can we write the story of our own lives in our own hand.

Both George C. Scott and General George S. Patton wrote the story of their lives large in their own hand. The Apollo 13 NASA crew and the astronauts they saved wrote the story of their lives large in their own hand as well.

And often enough, we also can write our own stories in our own hand, even though many times we may not realize that that's what we're doing.

I had the pleasure of attending a wedding some weeks ago. The son of friends of ours was getting married. In one of those odd twists of fate, it turns out that this kid had been one of my Boy Scouts way back when I was a Scoutmaster of Boy Scout Troop 93. Here he was, all grown up and getting married. The last time I'd seen this kid was back when he was 11 or 12 years old. Of course, I didn't recognize him. Funny thing was, several of his friends at the wedding had also been Scouts with him in my troop. I didn't recognize these guys either, these tall young adults with deep voices and facial hair. They were nothing like the 11-year olds they were when I knew them last.

But they knew me. They instantly recognized me, came up and shook my hand. They seemed delighted to see me again. We even posed for a group picture. I listened with joy and wonder as they recounted how much fun they'd had on our hikes and camp-outs. What they'd learned, what they remembered, and how the love of the outdoors sticks with them still.

It touched my heart. I was gratified to see, as a Scoutmaster to these young Scouts years ago, how large I had written in my own hand.

We look at our children, at the people they have become and are becoming, and we see them in all their perfections and imperfections. For good or ill, we often see ourselves in them, sometimes in ways that surprise us. He loves to cook, and so does his mom. She likes to garden, and so does her dad. They love to read a good book, and so do we. We see how large we have written in our own hand.

We think of the people we admire or detest, people who have influenced and shaped us, whose attributes we strive to follow and shortcomings we hope to escape. We see how large they have written in our lives in their own hand.

And so it goes. Undoubtedly, indisputably, each of us (that means you) has written large in our own hand in somebody's life. Each of us will be remembered for as long as that person may live. And in some ways that person will copy our handwriting, pass it on, and we will be written large again and again in the lives of others.

Next year, in August of 2017, Grace Church will celebrate her 150th birthday. This parish has been constant for 150 years. Since 1867, every Sunday we have met, sung songs, read scripture, and listened to sermons we hoped wouldn't run on too long. The lives of all those Grace parishioners have been written large into our lives and our community, and their stories are ours, whether we know them or not. Some of us here today have written large in our own hand in the story of Grace Church. All of us are poised to add our own handwriting to the story of this faith community, which has, in spite of all odds, met some 7,800 Sundays to join in praise of and service to the Lord our God.

Committees are forming to organize our birthday celebration next year. You will probably want to be part of one of them. Talk to me later, and I'll point you in the right direction. We have been talking about stewardship and the many ways we may be able to express it. There are simple maintenance tasks we could do. There are supplies that we could furnish. There are dozens of ways we can write large in our own hand.

Our Second Sunday offerings to local non-profits total over \$6000 so far. Pretty impressive for a congregation our size. Our many donations to Fairview School have touched dozens of lives. We bring a yearly barbeque to the Veterans home in Yountville. Small churches and community groups meet here in our facilities every week. Fun on the Run uses our parking lot. We host a yearly health clinic in the parish hall and courtyard. And so on. We are a keystone in this community. See how large we at Grace Church write in our own hand.

“A new creation is everything,” Paul has written. Of course, he’s right. Our Baptismal covenant calls us to become new people in the world. New people not just once, but again and again. People of service, kindness, and mercy in a world that sorely needs us. Now is not the time to put down the pen. Now is the time to be bold before the world, to continue to write again and again in large letters our stories as servants to our Christ, as faithful and active stewards of our heritage, as agents of mercy and generosity in our community. May God give us strength to continue to write large in our own hand. We at Grace Church have done so for nearly 150 years. With God’s help we will continue to do so for another 150.

Amen.

Sermon preached by
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July 10, 2016
Grace Episcopal Church,
Fairfield, CA