



# "Being the Body"

a sermon by

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Galatians 2:15-21  
Isaiah 43:1-3a, 18-21

Our New Testament lesson for the morning comes to us from Paul's letter to the Galatians chapter 2:15-21. The church in Galatia was struggling with what it meant to be a community whose members were defined not by their adherence to Jewish law and custom, but by their faith in Jesus Christ. Paul has just admonished Peter for eating with Gentile converts only when other Jewish converts were not around, and refusing to eat with the Gentiles when they were for fear of being criticized by his Jewish friends for dining with those who were not like them and who did not abide by their old laws despite the new freedom from the law that all were to enjoy in Jesus Christ. His central concern was how we understand one another in this new order ushered in by Jesus, and that we are not to define ourselves according to the old ways of life because faith in Christ demands something new. Here the Word of God in Paul's letter to the church in Galatia.

“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.” Here ends our reading. This is the Word of the Lord: Thanks be to God.

I know what some of you are thinking right now. You are probably thinking that it would not have been possible for me to pick a more confusing text to preach on this Sunday. And in many ways you are absolutely right. Paul's language is almost impossible to navigate and his message can be even more difficult to decipher because he packs so much theology into every single sentence. So the preacher often finds that when they lift one passage out of any of Paul's letters to illumine, he or she (as the case may be) risks taking their life or at least their inbox on Monday morning into their hands because it can sound like such nonsense and seem so irrelevant. But for all of its complexity and confounding language when you break it down this text speaks to one of the most simple experiences of a community, and one of the most basic impulses of human depravity that is our incessant and insatiable need to categorize and divide and subdivide ourselves in order to claim some sense of superiority over one another. In order to try and exert control and influence over the intrinsically reckless power of grace in the life of the body of Christ.

Paul was speaking to a community that was struggling to understand what it meant to be the body of Christ, to be a community made new by the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Notice that I do not say that it was a new community, but rather a community made new in Christ. You see, the Jews and the Gentiles had technically been in community together in some sense for ages. At least, they had long since determined how to function together in the same city while for the most part keeping the peace. The Jewish people had had centuries to cultivate the

ways in which they defined the boundaries of their covenant community under the law and were trained from birth to celebrate and abide by that law because it was what drew them close to God and one another and helped them to maintain their purity in the shadow of the temple. To abide by the works of the law- eating only certain foods, being circumcised, avoiding people- namely Gentiles, women, the sick, mentally ill, and so forth- who were considered ‘unclean’ and observing a host of other laws is how the Jewish people stayed righteous before God and kept their covenant community decent and in good order.

But, of course, things had changed with Jesus. Now all of a sudden a new day had been ushered in in the life of the covenant community and those means by which they had defined themselves and understood the proper place of those around them no longer held. Suddenly in Jesus, Gentiles- that is anyone who was not Jewish- could inherit the intimacy with God that was once enjoyed only by the covenant community and not because of the Gentile’s ability to love and live by the law, but because of Christ’s ability to live and love them. And the Galatians were really struggling with this. Not because they didn’t want the Gentiles to receive grace, but because they just didn’t know what to do with them once they did. They struggled because the gospel message didn’t come with a handbook for how to apply it in a world entrenched in its old habits. They didn’t realize that the crucifixion of Jesus meant not that everyone would be a part of their covenant promise, but that a new thing altogether had taken place. Their hearts had been transformed, but their eyes had yet to be redeemed because though they knew in their hearts that their community had been made new, their minds still forced them to see and to fear those ancient and familiar marks of division that permeated every inch of their new brothers in the faith and so they adopted a sort of separate but equal understanding of these other believers while they quietly began imposing old rules of the law among themselves and this made Paul furious. “We ourselves are Jews by birth... yet we *know* that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through *faith in Jesus Christ*,” he says. “But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor.”

“If I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a sinner.” Setting aside any pretense of piety, I’ve gotta tell you that I could lose some sleep over this phrase. Actually, if we really stopped to think about it, this phrase could probably keep all of us up at night and you know, it probably should. Because haven’t our own eyes become so accustomed to the divisions in the body of Christ that we forget that things are supposed to look differently with hearts that have been redeemed? And instead of celebrating that freedom that was won for us, the freedom to know that there is more to life than meets the eye, instead of celebrating that freedom to learn from and approach those who are different from us in service and in love and in fellowship at the same table- don’t we instead find ourselves reinforcing the very walls that Jesus lived and died to obliterate? And we can do so in the most unassuming ways. Like by not making eye contact on the street. Or checking the zip codes on our child’s class roster. Making assumptions about the beliefs and viewpoints of others so that we don’t ever have to ask. Or being content with generalizations so that we are never compelled to actually seek out truth. In our liturgy of confession each Sunday we so often hear in the assurance of pardon, ‘behold! The old life has gone and the new life has come. Friends: Believe the good news!’ But I have to wonder if we really understand what this means because if every Christian in Charlotte took this word seriously then I would bet that our lives and our city would

probably look far different than they do today.

For Paul the good news of the 'new life' that was ushered in by the crucifixion of Jesus is not just the forgiveness of personal sin. But it the radical reordering of life as we know it based on that provocative but powerful phrase, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." This is a life lived not in service to the law, not spent policing the borders of the covenant community, or indulging in those systems of distinction by which we set ourselves apart from the other. It is a life lived not by shutting out those sinners who were redeemed by grace just like you and I, or turning our face from the 'unclean' whose sickness or illness or poverty or disability or difference we fear and will never understand, but it is instead a life lived in embodiment of the person of Jesus Christ and the message of his love. If Christ is alive and truly in us and we in him then that means that we look to the lesson of his life for the model of our own- a lesson that breaks down the walls of separation that divide us and insists that, as the body of Christ, the truth of the gospel not just warm our hearts and echo in our minds but that it translates into a living breathing social reality that involves concrete and costly choices for the kingdom of God.<sup>1</sup> For the kingdom of God made a costly choice for us.

If this seems like an impossible task I can assure you that it is most certainly not. It can just be a profoundly terrifying one. For the choice of standing in solidarity with another, the decision of the body to fully claim all of her parts, can be costly indeed and the pages of church history are filled with testimony to this fact, but also to the power of the gospel to break down walls of separation in the face of overwhelming adversity. "One of the most remarkable stories of this kind from recent history emerged from the bloody conflict in Rwanda, where in 1994 members of the Hutu tribe carried out mass murders of the Tutsi tribe. At the town of Ruhanga, fifteen kilometers outside Kigali, a group of 13,500 Christians had gathered for refuge. They were of various denominations: Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, Baptists, and others. According to the account of a witness to the scene, "When the militias came, they ordered the Hutus and Tutsis to separate themselves by tribe. The people refused and declared that they were all one in Christ, and for that they were all killed,"<sup>2</sup>

The phrase "good news" used in Paul's letters is actually a type of military term. It is the term for news brought by a witness from the battlefield when a victory has been won. A victory in a far away place that has real and lasting implications on life here and now. The victory of the crucifixion is that the chasm between God and humanity has been broken down. Those laws and obstacles that once kept us out of the kingdom of God and the community of the faithful that enjoy life together with our Lord are forever torn apart. And as witnesses to this gospel, as disciples of Jesus Christ, it is our call to tell the good news that his life and death so long ago has real and lasting implications on the world today and to live out our assurance that it has changed

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<sup>1</sup>Richard B. Hays, *The Letter to the Galatians* The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Nashville: Abingdon 2000, pp.245-248.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

our lives forever.

And we can do so by refusing to build up those walls of division that his cross tore down and by resisting the security of a gated community of faith. We can live out the good news by insisting that distinctions of rich, poor, black, white, liberal, conservative and countless others do not define who we are as a people of God but rather the common commitment of maintaining the integrity of the gospel of love. We can put flesh and bones on our beliefs by being a body that refuses to tolerate the suffering of any of her parts regardless of the cost. By taking up the call to live as Christ in us and to examine every conversation, every interaction, every impassioned speech in light of their ability to perpetuate the work of Jesus Christ and his kingdom in the world and to refuse to indulge them for our own glory when they do not.

Because what good is the good news of the victory if it does not liberate us here today? What are we doing here as the body of Christ if we do not live as though he truly lives in us? The gospel promises to make life a little more dangerous and a lot more uncertain to be sure, but in the uncertainty stands the promises of God to the faithful. Promises for the faithful to share with one another and with the world, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior...I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise."<sup>3</sup> Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 43:1-3a, 18-21.