

1 Kings 19:1-15
Galatians 3:15-29

“Promises, Promises”
1st Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
J. Shannon Webster & Michelle Freeman Owens

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(Shannon) Lou Ann and I agreed early on not to argue in front of the children. We were never very good at arguing, so we didn't do a lot of that anyway, but we never did it in front of the children. The Apostles Paul and Peter, however, did at least a bit of that, and they did it in front of the new believers – the still fragile, evolving Christian community. You find the evolution of this debate throughout chapters 9 to 15 in the Book of Acts.

In short, the debate was between those who thought the emerging Christian faith was essentially a part of Judaism, and that believers would have to be circumcised, follow the Jewish law codes, and so forth. Peter was one of those. And others, chiefly the Apostle Paul, believed that God had done a new thing, and faith was through Jesus Christ alone, not following the old rules or being circumcised. Peter thought the faith was for the Jews, Paul was an evangelist to the Gentiles - those not “like us.”

They argued about it, and Paul finally won. Peter had to be persuaded by God's own self, when he got a vision on a rooftop of ritually unclean food that God told him to eat. Peter says, “No, Lord. I'm a religious man.” And God replies: “Who are you to call unholy what I call holy.” Then Peter finally threw in on the side of Paul, and the debate was settled. And a good thing too, or most of us would not be here in church.

I tell all that as an introduction to the text we read today from Galatians. This is Paul's theological mind at its finest, drawing out a careful and thoughtful rationale for a very wide reach for the church, a large tent that holds within it all sorts of different people. Here is his argument:

Who is the true Israel? God made a covenant with Abraham and Abraham's descendents. The real descendent of Abraham, says Paul, is Christ Jesus. And those who respond to the faithfulness of God in Christ are, through Christ, the heirs of Abraham. Jews, Gentiles, whoever. Christ has redefined who the people of God are.

Paul has to deal with the Torah, the law, the 1st 5 books of the Bible, which was nearly everything in Jewish life and religion. Even when they lost the Temple and the promised land, even in Exile, they had the Torah. Paul is a lawyer, you know, and the Law is dear to him. Nevertheless, it has to give way to Gospel. Paul does this by writing that the Covenant came first, long before the Law was given. Abraham came before Moses. And God doesn't break covenant.

The Law, religion (if you will), invented “sin”, in a way, by defining it. And it created the anxiety that made people long for grace. And it was temporary, until Christ should come and be the new covenant. Freedom is found in the Covenant, in the Promise, not the Law. That Promise is for all that Christ came for, so the Law that used to be exclusive has to give way to the inclusive unity that Christ created in himself.

(Michelle) Sometimes I wonder if we have truly been able to embrace and embody that freedom which Christ has brought for us. Have we honestly released ourselves from the anxiety-producing, ever-elusive Law? So often we talk about the way people should act or should say. We ask ourselves if we did something just right or was it really just passable. We judge others' behavior on an intangible code of perfection – and everyone falls short, especially ourselves.

This past week I was watching the Today Show while I got ready to come into the office, and I saw a piece about “Perfect” moms and “Slacker” moms, also known as the Alpha moms and the Beta moms. Honest folks – I couldn't make this up if I tried!

The Alpha, or perfect, moms are those who are always on the go: they work full-time, they always look great, they have their children enrolled in a variety of activities that will help them become high-achieving adults. In short, they are driven women who are seeking perfection in both themselves, and their children – she embraces the Law of standards.

The Beta mom is a different story. Often she works part-time, she wears comfortable clothes, her children are enrolled only in activities they seem to be interested in – and they do not have to stick with them, she highly values spending time with her children. She accepts that she will make parenting mistakes and views those mistakes as par for the course. In other words, she allows herself some grace.

After the mildly heated exchange moderated by Meredith Viera, I was bothered by the discussion, not just by those ridiculous labels, but more the lack of any thought on the impact of the children of these mothers. No one challenged the Alpha mom that perhaps her need to be perfect would have a negative effect on her children – challenging their self-esteem and increasing their need to please others instead of being content with themselves as they are. And what if Alpha mom's children fail or aren't as successful? Will they still be loved as much, even if they haven't lived up to the perfection of the law? Are they still in the family? Or in Paul's words, do the Gentiles get to be in the church?

(Shannon) Of course they do, because they were invited by Christ. And to let following the Torah exclude someone from grace would be to act as if Christ never came. That is Paul's argument, which takes him to one of the most powerful theological observations he ever uttered: In Christ there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, but all are one in Christ Jesus, and heirs of Abraham according to promise. ...a lesson that Birmingham, and many other parts of our country, learned the hard way.

“In Christ there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, but all are one in Christ Jesus, and heirs of Abraham according to promise.” The old distinctions that used to divide us do not matter any more, says Paul. It is not so much that we find our unity in Christ, but that Christ himself IS our unity. What sort of God is it that sent the only Son on our behalf, and adopts us as heirs?

Obviously the Jews were Jews and the Gentiles, Gentiles. Men were men and women were women. There were still slave and free, in that society. But the Apostle says, it doesn't matter. What matters is who Christ is. And when we know who Christ is, the barriers and hostility and superior attitudes have to be left behind.

Even today, in our debates in this denomination and others, we have not grasped what Paul was trying to tell us. Much of the conflict nationally in our church has been about who is in and who is out. There are movements afoot to require long, detailed subscriptionist faith statements for a least ministers and church officers. But who would Paul say belongs in the Church? The baptized. The ones who have “put on Christ as a garment.”

One way of defining church is to try and determine the boundaries, see how far the community will stretch, and say where the edges are, put up a long list of what you have to believe to be here, and how you have to believe it. (That's what they were doing in Jerusalem before Paul showed up.) *Another* way, would be to define the church by what is at the center. Let it get fuzzy out around the edges, as people explore their faith. But at the center, is Christ Jesus. At the center is the table, the heavenly banquet to which we are *all* invited.

We are made up of our relationships, with God and with each other. Daniel Day Williams wrote:

“The fundamental human craving is to belong, to count in the community of being, to have one's freedom in and with the response of others, to enjoy God as One who makes us members of one society.”

While the Law had its function, it provides no meaning, and finally it is not about Law but about Grace. We are not invited to pass a test, we are invited by Christ to follow. We are invited into deep, intimate communion, with God who walks among us in the shape of Jesus Christ.

So what are we saying when we baptize?

(Michelle) When we baptize a child or adult, we are recognizing God's claim on them as members in this community – the household of God. Today we are acknowledging that are in special relationship with Lee and his parents, Hillary and Court. As Brett Mitchell-Webb, an advocate in the church for children with disabilities, reminds us that in baptism, “no longer is the child perceived as an individual, independent person, but is now understood as a child of the New Covenant, to be raised in the Christian faith not by the parents only, but by the congregation as a whole...”

A Child of the Covenant, not a “Child of the Law.” In the Reformed tradition, we baptize infants as well as adults because what brings us to the waters of baptism is not how great *our* faith in God is, but rather how extravagant God's love and faithfulness are for *us*. Baptism is not some kind of litmus test about how much we know and follow the law – how “good” a Christian we are – how perfectly we behave and believe. No, baptism celebrates that we are each imperfect children of God, and that truth binds us together in the community of faith we call the church.

Today this congregation makes vows – promises – to Lee. Promises to love and nurture him, to help teach him how to be a disciple of Christ in the world. But the promises we make today are also to Court and Hillary, for they are not alone on this wonder-filled, wacky, sometimes-weary journey called parenting. We walk beside them, our very presence reminding them of Christ's love and God's amazing grace.

These promises are the same ones made a generation or two ago for each of you gathered here... by congregation members seated in churches much like this one. And these promises will be made again and again for generations to come.

When we baptize Lee in a few moments, we will not use his last name, and not because it's long or hard to say. This may seem like an insignificant detail, but it illustrates exactly what Paul was saying to the Galatians: it does not matter what your status is in society, it does not matter what the color of your skin is, it does not matter if you are American or not, it does not matter if you have sinned in this person's eyes or have offended that person's sense of morality, it does not matter if you are an Edmondson or a Webster or an Eady or a Love or a... or a Freeman, or even an Owens! We don't use our last name when we baptize because we belong to God. We are God's own children – heirs with Christ in the covenant. God's grace enfolds us *all* – no matter who we are... No, *because* of who we are: Children of God – living into the promise of God's abounding love, from our very first breath to the day we are called home. Thanks be to God, Amen.