

June 9, 2013

The Third Sunday after Pentecost

Galatians 1:11-24

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Earlier this week, someone in our parish jokingly quipped that by following a six week study of Galatians in our sermons, we clergy were apparently doing our best to ensure that summer attendance would dwindle to nothing.

While it is true that Paul's reputation as argumentative, zealous, and self-aggrandizing is sometimes deserved, I would also posit—and the recent followers of our year-long journey through the Bible will agree with me—that Paul is also deeply passionate about the Gospel and inspired by a very clear call to make sure that as many people are introduced to that Gospel. While his polemical style doesn't always suit modern thought patterns, there is no doubt that Paul was a man of great faith, great hope and great conviction.

When we take his letters in their contexts, that is, letters, written to specific communities addressing specific problems in a specific period of time, when we take a step back, unwind ourselves from his language and from our own preconceptions of what Paul is about, there is a lot here to learn from. The early church of the 3 and 400s knew this. Paul's theology informed the way the early church structured its burgeoning community.

Paul's letter to the church at Galatia is one of the most important in his canon, preserved by the church because it Paul doesn't shy away from using community strife as fertile ground for theological thought. Our church challenges are great opportunities for us to look more deeply at how to be followers of Christ.

In the section of Galatians we read this morning, Paul retells his own story of conversion. It is a story we heard in the Acts of the Apostles: Paul was an ardent and zealous persecutor of Christians. He was a well-read, well-educated religious leader who believed the growing movement of followers of Jesus to be a direct threat to the purity of Judaism. He was a murderer. For the cause of his religion.

But then he had an experience of God on the road to Damascus. It doesn't really matter how we, here and now, choose to interpret Paul's experience of God—a seizure? A stroke? A bizarre trick of the weather?—what is more important to our understanding of Paul and of Galatians and of our own lives as those changed by God is how *Paul* interprets his experience of God. Paul sees his experience on the road to Damascus as confirmation that he is set apart for important work. That God had “set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace.”

From there, Paul begins his journey as defender of Christ, teacher of Christians and as the first and most successful Christian witness and evangelist in the history of our church. How's that for transformation? Persecutor and murderer to apologist and evangelist.

That's Paul's story. The road to Damascus changed the beat of his heart and the course of his life. His experience of God was dramatic and miraculous and so was the life that followed it. We can say what we will about his rhetoric and theology, but there's not arguing his passion or dedication to his work from the moment of his conversion.

So what's your story? It might be as dramatic as Paul's, but it might not be. How do you tell your story of coming into understanding yourself as set apart and called through God's grace?

Yours might be a story of a long slow dawn like mine: I always knew I was beloved of God, just because I'd always been told that. I have green eyes and big feet and God loves me. Facts. But the *meaning* of that important fact didn't really occur to me until the year I lived in New York after my college graduation. I was waiting tables and scraping by in an unfamiliar city that didn't suit me. I was at loose ends, unsettled and sad. It didn't occur to me until several months after I had moved away from there that the piece I was missing was a steady reminder of the fact of God's love. I had not lost faith so much as I had lost any kind of touchstone to that faith. I had lost a life lived in response to my faith.

Slowly, bit by bit, I began to be aware as a young adult that not only was I loved by God, fact, but that my response to that love was a pretty strong foundation on which to build a life. For me, there was no lightning strike, no scales from my eyes or miraculous healing, there was just the slow, steady realization that life with Christ at the center made a whole lot more sense than life without.

Paul does not expect us to model his life after his. I imagine he'd be the first to admit that starting out as a persecutor isn't really the best path to follow. But I do think that there are many things we can take on from this letter to the churches in Galatia. One of which is this: know your story.

We all have one. For none of us sitting here is the story complete, but a work in progress, began before you were born, ending long after you have died. The story of your conversion to Christianity is an important one for you to know. It is important for you to know why you are here, why you get up on Sunday mornings, why you volunteer with refugee kids, why you come to formation classes or stick through three years of EfM. It is important for you to be able to put words to why your wrestle your kids into the car to get them here to acolyte, sing, or sit in the pews.

Whether your story is dramatic and mysterious, like Paul's, or more like a slow realization, the stories of our conversions to this set-apart life of grace are part of what bind us together as followers of Christ. Your story is part of who we are, this crazy parish quilt of all shapes and sizes, each one stronger when bound together with the threads of our commonalities and the threads of our respected differences.

Your life, like mine, is one life among many here. Your story, like mine, is one story among many here. Paul reminds us that we need many lives and many stories dedicated to spreading the good news to a world in need.