

St John United Church of Christ
Rev. Barbara Lohrbach
June 27, 2010

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Wade in the Water

Galatians 5:1, 13-25 -- The Message

*Christ has set us free to live a free life. So take your stand! Never again let anyone put a harness of slavery on you. It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life. Just make sure that you don't use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. **Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that's how freedom grows.** For everything we know about God's Word is summed up in a single sentence: **Love others as you love yourself.** That's an act of true freedom. **If you bite and ravage each other, watch out—in no time at all you will be annihilating each other, and where will your precious freedom be then?***

My counsel is this: Live freely, animated and motivated by God's Spirit. Then you won't feed the compulsions of selfishness. For there is a root of sinful self-interest in us that is at odds with a free spirit, just as the free spirit is incompatible with selfishness. These two ways of life are antithetical, so that you cannot live at times one way and at times another way according to how you feel on any given day. Why don't you choose to be led by the Spirit and so escape the erratic compulsions of a law-dominated existence?

It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on.

This isn't the first time I have warned you, you know. If you use your freedom this way, you will not inherit God's kingdom. But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.

Legalism is helpless in bringing this about; it only gets in the way. Among those who belong to Christ, everything connected with getting our own way and mindlessly responding to what everyone else calls necessities is killed off for good—crucified.

Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives. That means we will not compare ourselves with each other as if one of us were better and another worse. We have far more interesting things to do with our lives. Each of us is an original.

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The Bible, our sacred scripture, is an ancient story. Sometimes I think “what more can be uncovered from something that has been mined or gleaned for meaning for such a long time.” And yet here in the pages of this book are the stories of human beings who like me, sought to be loved, asked questions about their life’s purpose, and asked who was responsible for bringing forth this world as they knew it.

The UCC says “God is still speaking.” God is still speaking through the experience of the world and her inhabitants, but God is also still speaking through the pages of the Bible. With fresh eyes and fresh ears we hear these stories. We uncover the meaning for us in our day. Context is important when working with scripture. When we read the Bible, we read words that meant something distinctive to people who lived in the ancient world. They thought the world was flat and that the sun revolved around the earth. They believed the sea contained monstrous creatures of deep, like Leviathan. They believed because of their context and culture that men were the dominant gender and women were to belong to men with no rights of their own. Knowledge of science and knowledge of the other cultures of the world were limited. Context is vital to understanding the stories of the Bible.

Galatians is a letter from New Testament times...a letter attributed to the Apostle Paul. In this letter, Paul is addressing a major controversy of the early church—did one have to become a Jew in order to be a disciple of Jesus? The Galatians, who were Gentiles, are being told that the way they came to faith through Jesus was wrong and Paul was the one who taught them about Jesus. They are being told that they must become Jews first—be circumcised and submit to the law of Moses. Paul was furious—furious with the strong-arm tactics of the old guard and furious with the Galatians for caving in.

Paul believes that through Christ, God offers a relationship without preconditions except that one remains in the relationship itself. There is no need to take on oneself the biblical law in addition. This does not mean that Paul has abandoned ethical values, although some of his opponents accuse him of just that.

Paul makes it very clear that freedom is not just release from something - in this case the demands of the Law - it is also freedom for something, namely a relationship with the God who loves.

William Loader: “It bears reflection that Paul had to spend so much energy fending off Christians who were convinced they were right and he was wrong, and who appear to have put at the centre of their faith an obedience to what we would call a fundamentalist understanding of the scriptures' authority. Not all of his answers are convincing. He is however at his most convincing when he talks about what really changes people and what really matters most to God. It was a theological struggle and still is, but one which reaches right to the heart of what makes people whole. Religion can damage people. It can also make them well. Paul sees that clearly and is not willing to accommodate such abuse in the name of not rocking the boat.”

The spiritual says, “Wade in the water. Wade in the water, children. Wade in the water. God’s gonna trouble the water.”

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Paul was willing to wade in the water with the Galatians. The issue then was Jew and Gentile, circumcised and uncircumcised, the law of Moses and the freedom of Christ. Religion can damage people. It can also make them well.

A lot of our folks who would normally be here today are at another event—the Chicago Pride parade. Some of our folks are there to walk with the PFLAG contingency in the parade. Many churches are also marching in that parade today as well. The church I served before I came to St. John, HOPE UCC of Naperville, is there today. It's not the parade that's important—it's the stand that many people of faith are taking about an issue that still divides us, just as Jew and Gentile divided the Galatians.

Just as Paul was accused of abandoning ethical values, we who stand with the lesbian and gay community are also sometimes accused of abandoning ethical values. I know it's not easy to be in this place. I know how it feels to be condemned by other religious people and pastors for my position on the full acceptance of gays and lesbians in the church. I know how it feels to deny part of myself and my understanding of loving others when in the company of those who disagree.

I also know so many brothers and sisters who are gay and Christian...deeply spiritual and full of compassion, working to make the world a better place, loving others as themselves, taking the Gospel seriously. In every time and place, religious people have disagreed on how to do that very thing. God keeps troublin' the waters because God wants us to figure out how to make it work. God will not be satisfied unless all are welcome at the table.

Today I give thanks for church people who stand in the gap for the people that others would have us ignore or even condemn. I give thanks that I serve an open and affirming church who affirms the gifts of all the people. I give thanks that God opened my eyes to see with love those whom I once condemned.

There are some who would say I'm a moral failure because I believe that being gay is not a sin. In many religious circles, I would be a failure as a mother because I have a son who doesn't go to church and a daughter who is a lesbian. Maybe according to their standards I am. But I am not worried about their standards and I am not worried about the souls of my children. God accepts Dave and Sarah as they are. I believe so deeply in the grace and love of God that I trust the souls of my children to be in God's care and keeping even if in others eyes I have failed. **I trust God.** I trust God with the greatest treasure of my life, my children. I trust God to be gracious most especially to my children and even unto me.

Prayer of Rev. Joseph Lowery

Lord, in the complex arena of human relations,
help us to make choices on the side of love, not hate;
on the side of inclusion, not exclusion;
tolerance, not intolerance.

And as we leave this mountain top,
help us to hold on to the spirit of fellowship
and the oneness of our family.