

Brothers and Sisters, Dear Friends Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ...Amen. I have to admit, one of the things I love about the letters from the Apostle Paul is that he does not hold back one bit. He doesn't sugar coat anything, he simply tells it as it is and is especially true in his letter to the congregation in Galatia. In fact, at one point in the letter he calls the Galatians, "foolish" or "idiots", depending on the translation...but regardless of which translation you read, you can tell he is being critical of these folks. But, he does not do it just to be mean; he does it as a way to help them understand this Gospel message that is breaking out all over the place. He does this, so that they focus on Jesus Christ as their center and not their works.

You see, this church in Galatia that Paul is writing to, was at a point where they put their works and their actions ahead of God's grace. In fact, they had become so consumed with the way things were done and making sure they were done according to the old law of the scriptures, that Christ was no longer at the center of who they were. In their view, one became more defined by their actions rather than as a loved and redeemed sinner who was claimed by Christ. So in seeing and hearing of this and realizing it was contrary to the teachings of Jesus, Paul could no longer sit still and he had to say something.

In the section of his letter to the Galatians that we read for today, Paul opens things up by putting things in perspective. He begins this letter by really making himself secondary to the word he is proclaiming. And the word he is proclaiming, as he points out, doesn't come from any human source but comes from God. So right away, he wants to make sure that these folks in Galatia know that it's not just a criticism of personal opinion, but more a reminder of what God has told us what is important. In fact, he goes so far as to point out that he really never had any "formal training" in the church in Jerusalem to confer with those were already apostles. At that point then, he reminds them that this message he is telling them is one that comes from no human source, but instead comes directly from God. And in doing this, Paul is basically dressing himself down so that the Galatians can concentrate on the word, and not on the individual.

So from the opening of this letter, Paul is making it clear that this letter that he is writing is not about him. It is in fact about God and his word, that Gospel word which more than anything is meant to define us as a people here on this earth. Therefore, what we can take from this opening is that it's not so much the messenger (or his or her credentials) that are important, but the message itself. Regardless of where or how this Gospel message comes across, Paul is reminding us in this opening chapter of Galatians, the important thing is that we focus on the word above all things.

Sounds like good advice doesn't it? Sounds like something we should maybe be doing in our churches on a regular basis today doesn't it? Keep your focus on the word above and beyond all other things that surround it...sounds like really good advice to me. But unfortunately, like all good advice, it's not always easy to put that advice into action.

In our churches today, it is easy for any of us to fall into that trap to focus on those things outside of the word to the point where those things become more important than telling folks about Jesus. We start to focus on things outside of the gospel and pull those things into the center of our lives here, while at the same time attempting to push Jesus further and further to the side.

Which I kind of find ironic considering that the foundation in which our church was founded on is Jesus Christ. The thing that is important above all things, is that Gospel news, the good news of Christ's death and resurrection for all God's children. A message of hope for those in despair and a message of assurance for those in need. And yet, more and more we push Jesus aside, more and more we let these things become barriers in which attempt to block our view of Jesus. And at the same time, less and less people are coming through our doors and wanting to talk about Jesus because of all the barriers we've put between them and the Gospel.

When I was in seminary, we had to take a class on worship and the one thing I really liked about it was that it explained why we did what we did in our Lutheran worship. One thing that really caught my

attention was when we were talking about these albs that we wear on Sunday morning and what is the meaning of these as well as the stoles we pastor's wear. Well, as we found out the Alb, is supposed to show that we are cloaked in our baptism while the stole is meant to serve as a symbol of the yoke of leadership that comes with the pastoral office. Also, this was meant to be a sort of "dressing down" a kind of simpler way of dressing for worship for pastors compared to that of the Roman Catholic church. This was to keep people focused on the word and the sacrament and not the individual wearing them.

Now, while it was great to hear the history and symbolism behind these things, I started to wonder if they still serve that purpose. What jump-started this for me was a something someone said to me a few months back when they said to me "I guess it's time for you to get 'dressed up'" for church. Of course they were referring to this alb and stole that I'm wearing. But in hearing that I realized that something has changed. No longer does the alb constitute what it was meant to for so many years. No longer am I considered "dressed down" at this point, in fact it's the opposite...I'm considered dressed up. Not that there's anything wrong with dressing up, there are times that call for it.

But if the idea is to dress down, then maybe it's time for a change. If this alb and stole are serving more as a barrier, maybe it is time for a change. If these things are getting in the way of the gospel, If these things seem more important than the gospel...maybe it is time to shed them. I mean really, now that they are off, it does not change who I am. In fact, whether I'm wearing them or not, I am still a pastor right?

You see, these vests these albs are what Martin Luther classified, ecclesiastical rights, in other words, they can be a good thing, but are not necessary for salvation. But, if by wearing them I'm considered dressed up, if they are not serving their purpose of making the preacher anonymous and possibly are getting in the way of folks hearing the word, then maybe it is time to dress down a bit in the spirit for which those things were originally intended. And more than that, by dressing down a bit, as Luther intended, maybe...just maybe we can focus more on the word than on those things that become barriers to it. By dressing down a bit, maybe we can be more open with one another about our faith. By dressing down a bit and removing those barriers between one another, maybe we can start to open up to each other a bit more. And maybe by dressing down a bit, we can welcome in the stranger, and let them know that regardless of who you are, what you look like, or where you are from Jesus Christ died for you and here in this place all we care about is talking with you about that.

You see folks, as we gather together to worship our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, what we look like, what worship style we use, all of that really does not matter. And that is the message Paul is trying to get across to the Galatians when he tells them that the word he brings them is not from or about him...but rather it is a Gospel word straight from Jesus. Remember, it was Jesus that said "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, so too shall I be there with them". He doesn't give qualifications on how those meetings are to occur, he doesn't say that you have to follow a certain worship style, he simply calls us together to tell of the wonderful things that he has done for us a lost and broken people.

In his book "Messy Spirituality" Michael Yaconelli, the late co-founder of youth specialties, tells a story of when communion did not quite go so right in the little church he was the volunteer pastor at. He writes "One Sunday morning in our church, the pastor (that would be me) and the communion coordinator forgot that it was communion Sunday. During the middle of my sermon, the woman responsible for the communion table remembered. She looked at me and panicked, looked around the room trying to think of what to do, then stood up, left the meeting room, and disappeared into the Kitchen. A few minutes later she reappeared with the wine and the bread, set up the table in front of me (I was still trying to preach), and sat down. I finished the sermon, finally, and moved into the communion service. I began with the words of institution, I reached down and uncovered the bread, and there in plain view was our communion loaf...*hot dog buns!* The woman in charge of communion was not afraid to admit she had forgotten communion, she was not concerned about disrupting the service, and mostly, she did not want to put communion off another week. She loves communion so she improvised from the meager stock in the kitchen. Her love for Christ drove her to risk being thought of as disruptive so we could celebrate what our church is really about – the body and blood of Jesus. Of course she also gave us the

most unusual communion service we've ever experienced and a memory none of us will ever forget, which is what happens when we allow people to express their uniqueness. Warm memories and godly surprises abound."

In the end folks, how we tell folks about Jesus and what he has done for us is not so important. What is important is that the word gets out there. The word of Christ, that Gospel word of salvation for a broken people who hunger for it is what Jesus calls us to do for folks. Barriers will come up, but Jesus is there with us constantly breaking down those barriers and calling us to focus on the word above all other things. And if we do that, then I have a feeling that everything else will take care of itself in its due time. Amen