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A Short Sermon Series on the Book of Galatians Part I – “How Many Ways Can You Get There?” ”

(Galatians 1:1-3, 6-7, 11-24) "Paul an apostle--sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead-- 2 and all the members of God's family who are with me, To the churches of Galatia: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, 6 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel-- 7 not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.....11 For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; 12 for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. 13 You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. 14 I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. 15 But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased 16 to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus. 18 Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; 19 but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother. 20 In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! 21 Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, 22 and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; 23 they only heard it said, "The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy." 24 And they glorified God because of me."

Paul will not win any courtesy awards for this letter from Ms. Manners. He's both angry and rude here. This is the only letter of his in the New Testament that does not begin with – as polite custom would have dictated – an extended greetings and kind words to those whom he is writing. For example, in his letter to the Romans he begins by saying “*I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you...*” (Romans 1:8); in First Corinthians he says “*I give thanks to my God always for you....*”; in Ephesians he starts by saying “*I [always] give thanks for you....*” Eph 1:16); in Philippians he says “*I thank my God every time I remember you....*” (Phil. 1:3-4). In all of these letters to his

churches – letters that now make up the biggest part of our New Testament – Paul begins those letters with what was then the traditional polite form of address but then also goes on to infuse that form with real love and affection for those to whom he is writing. But with this letter to the Galatians, which we will be studying for the next few weeks, Paul is not only impolite, he’s actually rude. For while he does manage at least to offer them the first part of the traditional and polite greeting – “grace to you and peace” – he then he totally loses it and says this: *“I am **astonished** that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ.”* This in itself is astonishing: it is about as impolite as if I went into one of your homes, didn’t even greet you, didn’t thank you for the invitation, and immediately began criticizing you. Eugene Petersen’s translation makes the point even more clearly when he renders Paul’s words in this way: *“I [just] can’t believe your fickleness - how easily you have turned traitor to him who called you by the grace of Christ....!”*

So what accounts for Paul’s remarkable fit of bad manners as he begins this letter? There must be some terribly important reason that Paul – the **epitome** of a cultured Jew who had been trained up right by both his Jewish heritage and as a Roman ambassador – could write in such a hugely impolite and ungracious way to his audience there in the congregations in Galatia. And indeed there was a reason, an issue that is hugely important to Paul. For what he is *astonished* by, what he is *upset* by, what causes him to use very harsh words like “traitor,” is that the Galatian church has, as he puts it, deserted and in fact perverted the gospel. In Petersen’s translation, again, the intensity of Paul’s feelings are captured when Petersen translates Paul’s language to say that the Galatian church leaders are in fact teaching a *“lie about God.”* Goodness. What is happening here? What is at stake? Why such passion? Well, it is an old, old, old story that is as new as today’s headlines and as old as the Hebrew people turning to fashioning and worshiping a golden calf. It is the story of those who

would be tempted to put qualifications and footnotes and disclaimers on the unconditional grace of God; the story of those who would trade the radical love of God through Jesus Christ and its good news of radical acceptance for each and all for a restricted gospel that would value familiarity over grace. Let me unpack all that a little bit as we begin our short time with Paul for the next few weeks.

A few years ago, Barbara and I were privileged to hear a remarkable man. His name is Rodger Nishioka. Rodger grew up in Hawaii as a preacher's kid and now teaches youth ministry at a seminary in Georgia. He has been studying why young adults – twenty to thirty-five year olds – are not in church. His research has confirmed something very troubling. By and large this generation of young men and women is not anti-church, despite what sometimes gets said about them – in fact, they are **very** religious and seeking intensely for meaning in the midst of a sometimes very complex life. *So why aren't they in church?* Two main reasons: More and more these days, Sundays has become the only day for families. Saturdays are often work days, or the days to get done all the things that you didn't get done during the week – the grocery shopping, the errands, the trips to the mall, the home repair projects. And I think it is important that we understand that context, so as to never give the impression that because younger folks don't attend church with the regularity that past generations did, they are nonetheless just as committed to and caring for the church. But the other reason that Professor Nishioka found for young adults to stay away from the church is that too often they have found the church a place where folks are constantly fighting. Ouch. One of those he interviewed even coined a word; the person said *"The church is always having these 'sacri-fights.'"* **"Sacri-fights."** But here's the thing: folks can get fights lots of places. Their jobs can be tense sometimes. Even their families can sometimes be fractious. And so young adults are asking, Nishioka's research shows, *"why would we want to go to church to find a fight? We can find fights every other day*

of the week already. Fights at the office. Fights with family. No, what we need is a sabbath from fighting!” In the face of that sort of reality, that sort of context, if Paul were transported to today, I’ll bet he would also be tempted to lose his manners and say *“I am astonished that there are churches that are letting fights – particularly fights over **trivia** -- keep people from knowing the gospel of God’s unconditional love.”*

Nishioka also told another story that I think would again have had Paul losing his manners. It was a story related to him by a pastor friend, a story of what happened one Sunday morning. The pastor’s church (a Presbyterian congregation, although this could have happened at any congregation), which prided itself on being warm and accepting, which worried about why it had so few young adults, one day had a thirty-something family of four visit worship. From his seat behind the pulpit, the pastor observed the family come in, sit down, and one of the church leaders went up to the family. The pastor was delighted; they had been working on being a more welcoming congregation and he was glad that one of the leaders was reaching out in this warm and welcoming way. But pretty soon, the pastor saw the family get up and move to another pew. And he found out later that what had been said to the family was this: *“Welcome to our church. You’re sitting in one of **our** families’ spot. They’ll be upset if their pew is taken. Could you please move?”* The family never returned. I can only imagine how Paul might have written to that church: *“I am astonished that you have let such a thing keep people from the gracious love of God and that that was more important than sharing Christ’s love.”*

Now, these may not have been exactly the *issues* that Paul was dealing with in the Galatian church, but he was dealing with the same sort of *behavior* that was keeping the good news of God’s unconditional love through Jesus Christ from people. The issue that *Paul* was dealing with was the issue that probably was most contended

over in the first generation of the church's life in the first century: *whether or not folks who wished to be Christian first had to become Jews*. For the early leaders of what we might call the Jerusalem church – Peter and James – the answer tended to be yes. Their interpretation – at least until Peter experienced his own conversion – of Christ was that those who wanted to accept Christ as savior, as messiah, first had to become Jews. They had to keep the law, the dietary requirements (what we would call kosher), and the men had to be circumcised. And so what Paul was so upset about was that this church which he had helped to found, which was based on his understanding that the good news was for all people whether they first became Jews or not, was now apparently requiring folks who wanted to be Christian to become Jews first. And the effect was to keep the gospel from so many who needed its message of hope and healing, its good news of grace, its promise of life abundant and life eternal. There is no one who has stated the summation of the Good News of the Gospel better than Paul; and while it's found in his last letter, the Book of Romans, it is a summation that we can see a'borning here in this early letter to the church at Galatia. Do you remember how he put it in Romans? If I could only take one verse of the Bible with me to a desert island it would be this: *"There is nothing in all creation that will separate you, can separate you, from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."* That's the simple, freeing, marvelous good news – and you can see why Paul gets annoyed, even angry, when someone or any church would begin to put conditions, intentionally or inadvertently, when someone would put a fence around that gospel.

Well we will have much more to say in these coming few weeks as we travel with Paul through the letter to the Galatians. But for now, I want to leave you with two sets of questions. The first set is personal. You don't have to answer them aloud. But I do want you to think about them. Here we go: Is there something deep down in your life

that somehow makes you think that you are not worthy of receiving the unconditional love and grace of Christ? Is there some sin in your past that you think is so bad that at 3 a.m. you wonder if God could really love you? Is there something that you have done – of which you are mightily and maybe even rightly ashamed – that causes you to wonder if God can ever forgive? Do you find yourself thinking you must somehow earn God's love and so secretly despair that you can ever be good enough, patient enough, selfless enough to actually deserve God's unconditional love? Have you in any of these ways put your own fences around the gospel of life abundant and eternal? If any of that is so, then let me say, in the pointed way that Paul might have said to the Galatians: "*Stop it. Just stop it.*" Don't you think that God is powerful enough to cut through your sin, your limitation, your lack of perfection?? Don't make the same mistake the Galatians made of thinking that there were preconditions that you have to achieve to in order to receive the Good News of Jesus Christ. Pray to God to lift that misapprehension from your mind, lift that burden from your soul, let God be God. Turn God's job back over to God, and keep repeating those words that there is nothing, nothing, nothing that can separate you from the love of God - least of all your own sin!

The second set of questions are aimed at all of us, and they are ones that I want us to think about in the coming weeks and months as we work together to really claim and implement and celebrate the vision of spiritual and numerical growth that is at the heart of who we say we want to be. Is there anything that we as a congregation do that inadvertently sends a message to those who might wander their ways through our doors seeking healing and hope and ultimate meaning that there are things that they have to know or do or be in order to be *really* welcome in here, in order to receive the good news that we seek to embody? Are there any fences that we unintentionally erect around the unconditional grace of God? Are we truly welcoming the gifts of new people who come with new ways and new enthusiasm? How are we making this a hospitable

place for everyone who comes through our door – whether they are life-long Christians or whether this is the first time they have ever been in church – to know that God’s grace is for them too? It may be something as simple as committing ourselves to sitting further forward in the sanctuary to that new folks don’t have to make that scary walk to a front pew – let me tell you that to someone who doesn’t know the rules, who is not an extrovert, that can be a very long and self-conscious walk! It may be something as simple – and I’ve mentioned this before – to making sure that no new person or family ever sits alone at either worship or at Chat and Coffee. That is a simple gesture that conveys the indeed God’s grace is for everyone. There are doubtlessly other things. Some of them may be harder. Some may not be. They will continue to require that we seek ***to put everything that we do in the service of proclaiming the good news of the unconditional love of God to folks who don’t know it by our words and our deeds.*** Because that, finally, is the first and last job of the church. It’s the one job that no other organization does or can do. And there are – as the title of this sermon has it – there are many ways to be the church, to welcome new people, to build up the body of Christ. There are indeed many ways to get there.

And in whatever those ways are or will be, you and I and our congregation will be counted faithful if we begin our journey from that firm foundation laid by Christ, the unconditional love of God, which we would never, ever want to compromise or undercut. May it be that if Paul were here today, he would never have occasion to be astonished with us! Amen.