

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name

Pentecost II

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Paul expresses deep frustration and anger with the Christians in Galatia who are veering away from the gospel he preached to them. He wonders, what happened? What caused the desertion from the gospel? Apparently, some people have been preaching in Galatia, that because Jesus was a circumcised Jew, those who come to Jesus by faith will first have to be circumcised. In other words, the gentiles who have earlier received and accepted Paul's gospel, are unworthy to be called Christians. This two-step process which required circumcision before coming to faith as a Christian, contradicted what Paul had taught the people of Galatia.

By the example of his own call, as one who benefitted from unwarranted grace, as one whose apostleship was not by virtue of an invitation from any of the apostles, or as one who was part of the inner circle of Jesus, but directly called by Jesus, who was he to place impediment or undue burden on those who have willingly expressed the desire to come to faith in Jesus Christ? Paul's fight was one of resisting any claim that people have to undergo some process which was contrary to the faith to which he has been called. If the law as it were did not confer grace, why would the requirements of the law or the Jewish heritage of circumcision be the basis upon which either you or me or the gentiles for that matter, be beneficiaries of faith?

In his view, faith in Jesus relieves us of any burden of subjecting ourselves to a process which is likely to create an unwarranted division among the people of faith; dividing them into those who belong and those who do not belong; those who are worthy and those who are not. More importantly, Paul is resisting any talk of a test

which those who come to faith in Jesus Christ will need to meet before they can be considered Christians.

Paul's resistance to any test mirrors Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple. Solomon considers the magnificence and beauty of the temple, and offers a prayer which goes to the heart of who God is—that God answers the prayers of all who call upon Him. According to Solomon, even the stranger, those who do not belong to the Jewish tradition, those who are not children of the covenant, should anyone from anywhere walks into this holy space and offers a prayer to God, the God who answers prayer may hear their cry and answer their prayer.

Within Solomon's prayer is an acknowledgement that God answers prayer, even the prayer of those who do not share the same faith with Solomon. In his mind, the test is on the God who answers prayer. And so on the one hand, he throws open the doors of the temple to any and all who felt the invitation to walk in and cry out to God in prayer. And on the other, the would-be evangelist in him poses this question, how would the stranger know that Israel's God is a God who answers prayer if the stranger isn't allowed into this holy space to cry out in prayer? In order for God's glory to be heard and manifested beyond the borders of Israel, the temple should be welcoming to all who may come in and cry out to the God of Israel. For Solomon then, if there should be any test at all, let that test be dependent on God, and not him or any other person. Solomon recognized ever deeply that he could not play God by barring others or creating barriers for those who wanted to pray in the temple.

If Solomon believed that God's temple was open to all who sought God in prayer, Paul also believed that it would have made perfect sense for the Christians in Galatia to submit themselves to what others thought they ought to do in order to respond to the call of faith in Jesus Christ. But in so far as their call as Christians was not of man but of God, let no man create any barriers for you, let no man create any hurdles for

you, let no man distort the gospel of Jesus Christ with impediments too severe to bear, for you were not called to faith in Jesus Christ by any man, but by God.

I had a professor who was fond of using this cliché “Let God be God and man be man.” He believed that we harbored the propensity of playing God. We assume that it is up to an individual to prove whether he or she is worthy of God’s compassion. We look at others through the prism of our own spirituality and wonder if another person is Christian enough. We often impose our particular set of values and understanding of God on others, thinking that devoid of their own experience of God, our understanding of God should shape their understanding. We tend to forget that it is not for me or you to prove our worthiness or lack thereof, the test is on God to prove His faithfulness. We forget that our task, like the gospel story illustrates, is to aid, support and walk with others in their search of the divine.

And that is exactly what the Jewish leaders in today’s gospel story did. A centurion who was most likely a gentile reached out to these Jewish elders concerning a slave who was sick. Reminiscent of Solomon’s prayer about the foreigner who reaches out in prayer in the temple, that they may have their prayers answered, the centurion reached out to Jesus. He sought healing for his slave. He did not think of himself or his slave as deserving of the compassion of Jesus. The Jewish elders who went out to see Jesus on the centurion’s behalf did not think centurion was undeserving of any help. In fact, by indicating that the centurion actually built their synagogue for them, they were vouching for the very character of the man. So here is a gentile who found it expedient to build a synagogue for the local Jewish community. And if you notice, this is the only time in the gospels that we read of Jewish elders earnestly seeking help from Jesus on behalf of a gentile.

In a way, the attitude of the Jewish elders speaks more about the character of the man than the gospel story reveals. He was a good soldier like many of the soldiers who fought for our freedom and still continue to protect the freedoms we enjoy.

And so even if this man was not a person of faith, he was a good man who cared not only about his neighbor's faith, and how best his neighbor can practice that faith, he also cared about his own slave. And if caring for his slave meant he had to subvert his own authority and position, then so be it. Upon hearing the request, Jesus did not hold back, he began his walk towards the centurion's house.

See, the test is not on the centurion to prove anything, the test is rather on Jesus to prove that the sick slave was worthy of his healing. The test is on Jesus to prove that God is willing to walk into the home of a gentile. And so as he walks towards the house, Jesus hears words from the centurion expressing his unworthiness to have Jesus visit his home. Wherever Jesus is, his words alone will be sufficient enough to heal the slave. As surprised as he was, he did not consider the centurion or his slave to be unworthy, nor is anyone unworthy; be you a gentile or a Jew. All are worthy and deserving of the compassion of God.

As I indicated earlier on, the test is not on the one who reaches out to God in prayer, nor is it on the centurion who reaches out to Jesus for healing grace. The test is not on the one who has responded to the call of Jesus by faith. The test is on the faithful God who answers the prayer of the Jew, the gentile and the stranger-assuring each of His generous compassion. In so far as we have responded to the call of faith in Jesus, whoever you are, and wherever you are on your spiritual journey, let no one convince you nor should you convince yourself that you are unworthy, let no one convince you nor should you convince yourself that you cannot cry out to God in a house of prayer, do not convince yourself that God cannot visit you in your distress, pain or anguish, and even in our joys. If the burden were on us to prove something, anything, what on earth could we prove? That is why the test is not on us and cannot be on us; rather it is on God to prove His graciousness and faithfulness to us. Amen.