

Several weeks ago, we celebrated the Transfiguration, when Jesus “met” with Elijah and Moses on Mt. Tabor. The three discussed the time when Jesus would be “taken up,” and fulfill his mission in Jerusalem. As this discussion is only a few verses away from what we read this morning, this meeting would be fresh on our minds. And now, Jesus has “set his face toward Jerusalem,” meaning he is singled minded in purpose and ready to confront his destiny.

We now have a series of short vignettes that taken by themselves may be a little confusing, and makes Jesus seem somewhat cold hearted. Luke’s earliest audience would have immediately understood what is happening within our passage. Briefly, here’s what their take away would have been and what we too, need to understand. Being a follower of Jesus may cause us to be alienated from the people around us. Being a follower of Jesus requires a radical and single-minded commitment. We must be whole-hearted in our walk with Christ.

Now James and John had a very human response when they saw the lack of hospitality offered to Jesus by the Samaritans. They were indignant. They couldn’t believe the unspeakable rudeness Jesus endures. Didn’t

these people understand just who they were dealing with? So, they seek to make it right in human terms with Divine assistance - they suggest that they bringing down hellfire and brimstone upon the Samaritans and destroy them. And Jesus rebukes them.<sup>1</sup> They are thinking in instinctual human terms, not as God would have us think.

Well, we might be tempted to reply, the only way we CAN think is in human terms. True enough. However, in giving us the Commandments, God through Moses is inviting us to *think* and *behave* in ways that preserve relationships, not out of gut responses that can destroy relationships. In modern psychological terms, we are urged to get out of our reptile brain and into our higher order thinking. In today's letter from Paul to the Galatians, he suggests the way we can do that.

In my experience with my fundamentalist sisters and brothers, in this passage Paul is providing a list of what we gotta, shoulda, oughta do and what we oughta, shoulda, gotta avoid or risk eternal damnation. I humbly submit to you that to read it this way is to miss a larger and deeper point.

Let's recall why Paul is writing to the churches in Galacia. He is working to correct a perception that in order to be followers of the Way or

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<sup>1</sup> Parsons, Mikeal C., "Commentary on Luke 9:51-62," [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)

what will become to be known as Christians, one must first convert to Judaism and adhere to all of Jewish law. No, no, no, no! Paul is saying. The Good News in Jesus Christ is that His love for us anticipates us and envelopes us such that every other authority, be it religious, civil or social is completely secondary. Whether one is a Jew or a gentile, whether slave or Roman citizen doesn't matter - that status does not need to change in order to be a follower of Jesus. Jesus' willingness to die on the cross is ample demonstration that divine love for all of humanity is unconditional. Paul believes with all his being that there is no practice and no authority that deserves our deepest loyalty. Our deepest loyalty belongs to God alone.<sup>2</sup>

In today's reading, Paul is reminding us that for freedom's sake, Christ has already set us free. So just what is this freedom? Through Christ we have been freed from all that which separates us from God. We are free to respond to Christ's invitation to be his disciple. We are free to respond to our circumstances as God would like us to. Because our freedom is a response, not an obligation, we are free from the burdens of

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<sup>2</sup> Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "Exegetical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word Year C Vol 3*, David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY) 2010, 88.

the law. And ironically, if we respond in gratitude for our freedom, we end up fulfilling the law of loving God and loving neighbor out of love itself.<sup>3</sup>

Paul's list is not meant to be a near impossible set of demands.

Let me read to you Eugene Peterson's translation of a portion of this passage, from his contemporary language bible called The Message.

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?

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; trinkets gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divide homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone not a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on.

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 basic holiness permeates things and

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<sup>3</sup> Martins, John W., "Christian Freedom," [www.americamagazine.org](http://www.americamagazine.org)

people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, to need to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.

In hearing Peterson's modern translation, I hope you are getting the sense that Paul has no issue with our having desires. Rather, Paul's concern is letting our desires control us and putting our desires to use that harms us or others. As followers of Christ, our desires should be used to preserve and enhance relationships, not undermine or destroy relationships.

Paul is not saying that these behaviors should be inherent to who we are. Nor is he suggestion a replacement law of obligation. Rather, Paul is saying that in response to our freedom in Christ we develop an ethical way of living and being in the world.<sup>4</sup> With the Holy Spirit's help, we realize that we ought to value ourselves and others and that our relationships are characterized by equality and reciprocity. As we live into this Christian ethical way of life, we allow the fruits we bear to form us. We come to understand that our vision of what the Kingdom of God is like is something we work toward in making that vision a reality. Both vision and actions are inextricably linked.

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Douglas, 'Theological Perspective,' *Feasting on the Word Year C volume 3*, David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY) 2010., 184.

So is our commitment to Christ, individually and corporately single-minded? Are we willing to “set our faces” toward an ethical Christian life? What is our vision and what are we willing to do to realize the vision of the Kingdom of God? How do we feel called? Whatever the answers are, be sure that freedom in Christ makes possible our ability to be in loving service to others, fulfilling God’s will for all human relationships. For that, let’s give thanks to God.

AMEN.