

“We are all One In Jesus”

Remember the song “Imagine” by the Beatles? Some of the words went like this: *Imagine all the people Living for today. Imagine there's no countries. It isn't hard to do. Nothing to kill or die for.* Sounds like that is possibly what Paul is recommending in a way today when he writes “There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” He is telling us that those human divisions or categories that humans love putting each other into does not apply or work in God’s realm. We are all God’s beloved as Paul repeatedly tells us throughout his letters.

In today’s letter, the Apostle Paul is writing to the early church in Galatia. Now, if we were to travel to Galatia today, we would end up in modern Turkey. As a gateway between Asia and Europe, Turkey has known much conflict throughout its history beginning with the creation of Galatia thousands of years ago and the area is also known for this long history and its beauty.

Turkey is still around but Galatia, as it was known, disappeared. The state of Galatia existed from 280 B.C.E. until sometime in the 1<sup>st</sup> century of our Common Era. No one is quite sure what happened to the Galatians except that they were absorbed into a Greek-speaking culture in a region known as Anatolia. They may have been absorbed into this other culture about 10 to 15 years *after* Paul was among them.

Being an ancient culture, as a way to communicate, letter writing was the way to go. Letter writing to the ancients is what emails and text messages are to our modern culture. Some fear that because of our new technologies that the art of letter writing will fall away and that our history will not be saved because of what we do write will not be saved in a form that can be passed down. Thankfully, Paul’s letters were saved and they were able to be sent across hundreds of miles of ocean and land to the Galatians. We are able to get a little window into what was taking place in the early church.

And as Christianity was taking shape, the Galatians were part in its shaping with the help of or because of the Apostle Paul. However, there were others in this early stage of Christianity that were not preaching what some called the true Christianity or the Christianity as we know it today or the message that Paul was preaching.

Paul, upon learning of these other preachers, wrote to the Galatians in exasperation and urged them to not engage in matters of the flesh as these other preachers were engaged in debates about circumcision. These other preachers purporting to be Christian were leading debates about whether or not the Gentiles should or should not be circumcised to become followers of Christ. Paul felt that they were missing the bigger message that God brought to us in the death and resurrection of Christ. We are to be followers of Christ when we live in the Spirit and not the flesh.

In earlier verses in the book of Galatians, we are told that we have the freedom in Christ to choose the fruits of the spirit such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. We can choose to love instead of hate. We can choose to be joyful instead of grumpy. We can choose to work for peace instead of working to fight against the perceived enemy. Our freedom is not earned by adherence to the laws of the flesh. It is our faith alone in Christ that brings to us these freedoms.

Paul reminds us that with freedom comes responsibility. He writes, "God is not mocked for you reap whatever you sow." As one commentator put it, that when the freedom that we are called to becomes "disordered desires, we actually become enslaved not to one another but to our own passions and this ultimately destroys community." This shows us that although we are given freedom, what we choose to sow is what we reap. If we sow love, we will reap love. If we sow peace, we will reap peace. But if we sow bitterness, we will reap bitterness. If we sow fear, we will reap fear. If we sow hatred, we will reap hatred.

But many thought that Paul and his message was heretical and that he was bringing a new religion. Paul understood his message as showing them the fulfillment of promises made to Israel and to Abraham and his descendants. Yet, persecution of these early Christians prevailed.

This persecution was due to the rule of Roman Emperor Claudius. The Emperor led many to believe that any disorder in Rome was because of the debates between Jews and Christians and worked to throw *both* out of Rome in the year 51 C.E. Emperor Nero continued with the persecution during Paul's time with the Galatians believing that Christianity was just a heretical sect in Judaism. As such, some felt that this message, instead of bringing peace was bringing the wrath of God upon Israel.

As modern Christians look back upon Paul's time in which he was traversing hundreds of miles of land and water, we see him sharing God's message of hope and love and that he teaches us that with Jesus' resurrection comes the new creation in which a new Spirit-given life of the Messiah makes our old world or in other words, our old ways fall away. Sadly, even today, this message seems radical to some who pervert the Good News and use scripture to inflict harm on others they deem different.

What always amazes me is how much land and water the Apostle Paul covered in his travels. I am a map geek so I encourage you to look at a map when you get home. Galatia was in the Asian Minor which is now, as I mentioned earlier, in modern day Turkey and borders Syria and Iraq. Then, look at the distance it was from Jerusalem and Rome. I guess the saying "if there is a will, there is a way." It certainly was in Paul's case.

His call to the Galatians to not give up is particularly amazing. To have traveled as far and as much as Paul did under the threat of constant persecution, Paul did not give up. He kept traveling far and under harsh conditions to spread the Gospel and his faith was so strong that even given these circumstances he kept traveling near and far to spread the Good News of God and Jesus!

As the Galatians were seen as preoccupied with the letter of the law rather than focusing on the spirit of a compassionate life in community, we can turn that same lens to our modern world. As we listen to the debates against certain groups of people and the work of some to enact laws to control their inclusion or exclusion, I see the focus today also being on the letter of the law rather than a focus on the spirit of compassionate life in community.

It is not easy to sow the fruits of the Spirit in such tense times we experience today. Yet, it is in such times as these that make sowing the fruits of the Spirit so much more important to do so and following Paul's example – to not give up

trying. We are called to continue God's call to us to honor each other for we are all one in Jesus and in God.

I think that the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi sums up both Paul's letters and much of Jesus' messages so well as both encourage us to not give up on God's call to us. We are called to see that we are one in Christ Jesus. This oneness calls us to help each other when one part of the body of Christ suffers in any way. Here, then, is the Prayer of St. Francis:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace, Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy;  
O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;  
to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. This is a good prescription, if you will, in living out our faith, God's call to us and our covenant with each other. May it be so. Amen.