

Faith Mennonite Church  
May 28, 2017  
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**Putting on Christ and living by faith**  
*Galatians 2:20; 3:1-9, 23-29; 5:1, 13-14, 22-25*

The song that we will be singing following the sermon this morning is a Christian folk song from the 1960s. “They’ll know we are Christians by our love.” How many of you remember singing this ... around a campfire or in worship? When Miriam included this in her suggested hymns for this morning, it brought back a rush of memories. Memories of youthful optimism that singing this song could make a difference—could shape the world! Memories of youth camp with friends I enjoyed and the shared faith we were discovering (and the romantic crushes!). Memories of my own growing consciousness about the importance of racial and gender justice. Memories of a hope that love would be the dominant image of Christians and Christianity in our society.

Forty-five years later, I’m not quite as youthful. While I remain a person of hope, I’m more a realist than an optimistic on most days. While we have greater multicultural and gender diversity in the leadership of our Mennonite churches today, this required more than singing together. And the struggle continues. What I couldn’t have imagined as a teenager, is the degree to which the popular imagine of Christians and the church in our country has become one of legalistic and unloving coercion, of judgmentalism, and sometimes of downright hatefulness. What happened to “They’ll know we are Christians by our love?”

I’m not going to try to parse the factors within the past four decades that have created the current culture of extreme division and bad behavior. We know there have been times in history that were more extreme and vitriolic. And we know that there are places in the world where the stakes are much higher than what we experience here. This morning I would like to help us reflect on Paul’s letter to the Galatians, for I believe he addressed some of our malady even though he was writing into a very different religious and social/historical context.

Scholars believe that Paul wrote this letter sometime in the 50s—mid first-century of the Christian era. The church in Galatia, in Asia Minor, was a result of Paul’s missionary work. It was largely a Gentile church that had accepted Christian faith through Paul’s preaching that God’s love for all people was revealed through the death and resurrection of Jesus. This was a revolutionary message: this was not a God of demands, but a God of love. This was not a God of superstition or coercion, but a God of self-giving and invitation. This was not a God of rigid rules and rites but a God of freedom and relationship. Paul had taught that we enter this relationship through baptism. In baptism, we symbolically drown—we die to the former life of revenge, scarcity, competition...of rules and regulations. Rising from the waters of baptism, we “put on” or “clothe ourselves” in Christ, having our characters transformed by God’s Spirit, so that we become an image of the One in whose image we were originally created. This is not magic, nor does it happen in an instance. As the Apostle Peter wrote, we “*grow* into the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).

The church in Jerusalem, ground zero of this new movement, was predominantly a sect within Judaism. This “mother church” was interested in the life and character of the churches that Paul had started. Some of the visitors from Jerusalem, when they went to Galatia, felt strongly that to truly be Christian one needed to fully observe Jewish law and customs as the Christians did in Jerusalem. At least some of the Christians in Galatia accepted this, and perhaps were even drawn to it. There can be a security in well-defined rules and boundaries. There may have also been an attraction to being connected with a historic religion. But it probably also caused some tension: to what extent did one follow the Jewish law? Were Kosher-observant Christians more faithful than non-Kosher observant ones? Was baptism enough or did one also need to be circumcised if you were male?

Paul took a strong stand on one side of this debate. His position was that Abraham was the father of faith. Abraham had received a promise, of blessing/salvation for *all people*, which he received on

account of his stepping out and following God through faith. Indeed, that promise came hundreds of years before God gave the law. It was not until Abraham's descendants were released from slavery in Egypt, and wandering in the wilderness, that God gave the law. This newly freed slave people needed the law as a guide in the formation of a community. But, according to Paul's understanding of Jewish history, the law didn't have transformative power. Its role was to point out wrong and right, but it couldn't change hearts.

Paul was his own best example: he was a Pharisaic Jew, fully knowledgeable of the law, yet he was ruthless toward others. He had hunted down Christians in order to persecute them and he stood in consent when Stephen was stoned. Paul started a new life after his encounter with Christ on the Damascus Road. He gave up beating Christians and joined them. He wanted everyone to have the same powerful, relational encounter with Christ, the Son of God, that he had had. [Note: I do not mean to imply that Paul's experience is/was the rule for all Jewish people through history. Psalm 119 speaks of the law of the Lord being "sweeter than honey."]

We know from Paul's other writings, especially his letters to the Corinthians, that he was not advocating an ethics-free, do-as-you-please religious movement. Paul clearly believed that the path of faith involved behaviors that honored God. But Paul would not abide the kind of legalism that created divisions between people, divisions based on religious heritage, on social class, or on gender. In Christ, we are all children of Abraham (and Sarah). Paul echoed Jesus when he wrote that the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Paul's version of "they'll know we are Christians by our love" was his recitation of the "fruit of the Spirit." He didn't stop with love, but added "joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Paul said this is "no law against such things." And we know that there is no limit to the influence, the infectiousness, and the goodness that comes when people live in and through these characteristics.

Fifteen years ago, the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church, two separate denominations in the US and Canada, with somewhat different histories of migration patterns and of polity (self-governance), merged to become one denomination. Although that merger resulted in separate churches north and south of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel (which is another story), many of us hoped for a unified body that could join forces in being a church of healing and hope, a church focused on the needs around us, a church inspired by and empowered by the Holy Spirit to demonstrate peace for a world that badly needs it. But even in its formation, in its articles of membership, treatment of glbtq persons was singled out, and *not* in a spirit of inclusion. During the past 15 years, this matter of legalism fermented to the point where we couldn't talk in love, couldn't listen in love, couldn't fully accept the freedom to accept our oneness in Christ. Now, some are walking away. I wonder if the same thing happened in Galatia. Did the church accept Paul's admonition and return to its first love, its enlivening faith? Or did some choose a path of favoring a kind of legalism? Did division ensue?

We will never know. But, because this letter has come down to us, because we have inherited these words from Paul, it is we who are called to take them to heart today. It is we on whom God calls, through Paul, to carry on the gift of faith, the gift of oneness in Christ, and to follow the law of loving our neighbor as our self. The world is watching. Will they know we are Christians by our love?