**Galatians: Paul’s Letter of Freedom**

**Sunday September 9, 2018**

**“Apostle of the Heart Set Free” (Galatians 1:11-24)**

**1. Introduction: *Paul’s Freedom Story***

The title of this morning’s sermon is taken from F.F. Bruce’s book on the life and thought of the apostle Paul, entitled, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free.* Interestingly enough, another New Testament scholar, Richard Longenecker wrote a book on Paul with a similar title, *Paul, Apostle of Liberty.* People often these two books mixed up, but this similarity points to a central theme in the life and thought of Paul – *freedom*. Another Christian writer, Eugene Peterson, has also picked up on Paul’s focus on freedom. In his book on Galatians, he writes:

“Every Christian story is a *freedom* *story*. Each tells how a person has been set free from the confines of small ideas, from the chains of what other people think, from the emotional cages of guilt and regret, from the prisons of the self, sin-separated from God. We are free to change. The process of that change is always a good story, but it is never a neat formula” (*Travelling Light,* p. 45).

Peterson goes on to note that Paul’s message is that we are “*free to change*.” Yet Paul doesn’t give us a formula for this change; instead, he tells us a *story* (*Travelling Light,* p. 46). Specifically, Paul tells us *his story.* It’s the story of his collision course with Jesus on the road to Damascus; a story that is told three times in the book of Acts (9:1-30; 22:1-21; 26:1-23) and one that he tells here in Galatians 1:13-24. In the larger argument of the letter, Paul tells his story (1:13-2:10) in order to prove his *thesis statement* about the gospel, which he sets forth in 1:11-12 - “*For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin;**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.*”

As I mentioned last week, Paul needed to defend the gospel that he preached to his Gentile (non-Jewish) converts in Galatia because his rivals, the Judaizers, were arguing that it was inadequate and incomplete. While the Judaizers didn’t oppose its central message of faith in Christ, they stressed that it was only half the story; the Gentile converts were also required to observe to the Old Testament laws, specifically circumcision, in order to be accepted fully by God and to live the Christian life. Paul, on the other hand, saw in the message of *full salvation in Christ* the vital truth that God loves, accepts and transforms these Gentile converts apart from the Mosaic Law. In a nutshell, Paul believed that Christ’s salvation was all that was needed and that nothing could be added to his redemptive work. But, in order to sling mud at Paul’s law-free gospel, his rivals in Galatia suggested that Paul’s message represented a radical departure from the one proclaimed by the Jesus’ original disciples, a group known as the Jerusalem apostles. So, Paul needed to tell his story in order to demonstrate that the gospel and his mission did not have a human origin, but a divine one, borne out of a dramatic encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus.

While Paul’s tale plays a definite role within the letter’s argument, it is also a story of the apostle of the heart set free and, while it’s a unique story, we need to realize that every Christian story is a *freedom story.*

**2. Free to Change**

Paul’s freedom story begins with his past, powerfully demonstrating God’s incredible ability to change people’s lives and set them free. His story begins with this confession - “You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism” (1:13). Paul’s “earlier life in Judaism,” included his Jewish identity and upbringing (Philippians 3:5), his thorough training in the Jewish Law at the feet of the famous rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), and his membership within the religious group known as the Pharisees (Philippians 3:5). As a Pharisee, he would have viewed the Law as God’s greatest gift to Israel. So in his mind adherence to the Law was essential for God’s people. To this privileged birth, education and position, Paul brought extraordinary passion – “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” (1:14). Paul’s zeal for his Jewish faith caused him to go above and beyond the religious practice of his contemporaries.

So, Paul was neither dissatisfied nor disenchanted with his life in Judaism, rather he considered all these things to be very valuable, that is, until he encountered Christ (Philippians 3:7). It was Paul’s zeal for his Jewish faith that led to his persecution of the Christian church (Philippians 3:6). As a Pharisee, he was likely angered that many followers of Jesus, who claimed to be God’s people, were not living by the strict requirements of the Law. In Galatians 1:13 he declares, “I was *violently* persecuting the church of God and was trying to *destroy* it.” So Paul, the Pharisee, enraged by Christianity, set out for Damascus on a collision course with Jesus the Messiah (Acts 9:1-2; 22:4-5; 26:12). It was this encounter with Jesus that would radically alter the course of his life.

When I reflect on Paul’s story, I often think that he was the unlikeliest candidate to become a follower of Christ, a missionary to the Gentiles, and a champion of the law-free gospel. He was, after all, a “Hebrew of the Hebrews” and a Pharisee, who strictly followed the Jewish Law to the degree that he considered himself “faultless” (Philippians 3:5-6). No wonder he was so incensed by Jesus’ followers and desired to wipe them off the face of the earth. And yet, this devout Jew experienced a complete reversal in his life. He went from being a persecutor of the church to becoming a preacher of the gospel. If a poll had been held in the early church, Paul would have been voted the least likely to join their ranks. But God, of course, had other ideas. This leads me to be less likely to write people off as beyond redemption. God has a habit of reaching out to the unlikeliest of people, extending to them his grace and love and calling them to a different kind of life. So as individuals and as a congregation, perhaps we need to stop viewing some people as lost causes and instead become open to the work of God in the most unexpected, even the most resistant people around us. Our God is the champion of hopeless cases, so we need to be ready to welcome the most surprising people into his family.

God was the author of this great reversal in Paul’s life as he is for all of our lives. While Paul’s dramatic encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus was an extraordinary event, there are elements within Paul’s story that are common to all our stories, which focus completely on God’s initiative to free us.

• *God chose us.* Paul writes in Galatians 1:15, “But even before I was born, God chose me.” Eugene Peterson writes, “We are not a last-minute intrusion on God’s attention. We are not something incidental to God’s plan. We are not something that just happened along in the course of certain biological goings-on in the human race. We are, each of us, “set apart.” We are *pre*loved by God” (*Travelling Light,* p. 48-49). Paul writes in Ephesians 1:4-5, “Long before he laid down earth’s foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ.”

• *God calls us by his grace* (1:15). God has *invited* each one of us to become part of his family. Clearly, God doesn’t invite the most deserving or the most capable because his grace, his free and unmerited favour, extends to the unlovable and undeserving. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:9-10, “For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.*But by the grace of God I am what I am*, and his grace to me was not without effect.”

• *God takes great pleasure in revealing Jesus to us.* Paul writes, “God . . . was pleased to reveal to me” (1:15-16). Ponder these fantastic words for a moment - God takes *pleasure* in working in our lives and transforming our minds and our hearts by revealing Jesus to us. Peterson writes, “You think religion is a matter of knowing things and doing things. It is not. It is a matter of letting God do something for you – letting him love you, letting him save you, letting him bless you, letting him command you. Your part is to look and believe, to pray and obey (*Travelling Light,* p. 49). Indeed, this is God’s work in us and we need to be open to allow this to happen.

So, Paul’s story of being freed is the story of every Christian who has experienced the grace of God. “This is the heart of the Christian story. We accept Christ as Lord and Savior. We realize that God is the living center of life and that he has provided the means by which we can live in conscious, glad relationship with him. We live not by what we know, but by trusting in God who is for us. We live not by moral projects but by obedient faith. The moment we do that we have our first authentic taste of freedom” (Peterson, *Travelling Light,* p. 50).

In the wake of this great change in Paul’s life, he immediately did not consult with any human being nor make a quick trip to Jerusalem to meet with the other apostles (1:17). Instead, he travelled into Arabia for a period of solitude and reflection. Times of solitude, silence and reflection need to be part of our lives as well. Thomas Merton wrote, “The world of men has forgotten the joys of silence, the peace of solitude which is necessary, to some extent, for the fullness of human living. If man is constantly exiled from his own home, locked out of his own spiritual solitude, he ceases to be a true person” (*The Silent Life,* p. 166). So, we need to make room in our lives for God to speak to us - to be still and know that he is God.

After Paul’s sojourn in Arabia, he returned to Damascus and then travelled to Jerusalem and visited with the apostle Peter (1:18). Over a period of fifteen days, Peter and Paul became acquainted with each other and talked about their common commitment to Christ. These two followers of Jesus, whose faith stories were different, yet remarkably similar, sat around the fire and shared stories how God got a hold of their lives. Sharing our stories with each other is essential for us as well. We need to take time and make space in our gatherings so that we can tell our faith stories to each other as affirming reminders of God’s grace. “In the telling (of our faith stories) we recognize the common plot of God’s grace setting us apart, personally calling us and revealing his Son to us” (Peterson, *Travelling Light,* p. 53).

**3. Free to Serve**

God’s grace in our lives frees us to change. But there is one final element from Paul’s story of freedom that is also applicable to us. God sets us apart, calls us by his grace, reveals his Son to us and *sends us out in mission*. We are free to serve. Paul tells us that God revealed Jesus to him, “*so that I would proclaim the Good News about Jesus to the Gentiles*” (1:16). His conversion to Christ was closely connected with God’s call to mission. So, the story of faith develops vocational dimensions. Christ’s appearance to Paul was not only the birth of his new life in Christ, but it was the occasion for his calling to be the apostle to the Gentiles. Right after his visit with Peter, Paul began his work and journeyed into the provinces of Syria and Cilicia, preaching the faith that he once tried to destroy (1:21, 23). Paul’s God-given commission as “apostle to the Gentiles” would guide his activity for the next thirty or so years. In that time he would travel across Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece, preaching the gospel, establishing churches and writing letters to nurture, challenge and instruct these congregations.

Now you and I might say, “Well, that’s how God worked in Paul’s life. I’m no Paul. I’m not called to be an apostle to the Gentiles.” In response, the words of that famous spiritual, *There is a Balm in Gilead,* ring out loud and true -

“*If you cannot preach like Peter,  
if you cannot pray like Paul,  
you can tell the love of Jesus  
and say, ‘He died for all.’”*

All of us are called to share the story of Jesus, that wonderful good news of God’s grace, with those around us. Again, Eugene Peterson’s thoughts are very helpful:

“No life of faith can be lived privately. There must be overflow into the lives of others. The channels of this overflow are numerous and cannot be programmed by one person for another. Paul’s life overflowed into the life of missionary to the Gentiles. Others overflow into the life of merchant, or teacher, or salesman, or student, or engineer, or janitor. The channels always open up. The story of faith always opens out into the everyday and takes shape in the world of work, involving other persons in its freely lived love” (*Travelling Light,* p. 54).

Paul was commissioned to be apostle to the Gentiles and Peter was commissioned to be apostle to the Jews. God was working in both of these men as they engaged in mission (2:7-8). In the same way God is at work within each one of us as he sends us out into the world with a mission. While we share a unified message - the gospel - we reach out to a rich diversity of people within our own unique contexts. So, who is God calling you and me to minister to this week? What unexpected people will God bring into our orbit for us to serve? There may even be someone as angry and as resistant as Paul out there who needs to hear God’s story of freedom.