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

**Sunday October 14, 2018**

**“Paul’s Heartbreak” (Galatians 4:12-20)**

**1. Introduction: *The Heart of a Pastor***

I must admit that this morning’s reading from Galatians really impacted me for obvious reasons. So far in our journey through Galatians we have encountered Paul the apostle, Paul the theologian, and Paul the defender of the faith. Yet here, in this passage, we get a glimpse of *Paul the pastor*, whose love and concern for the spiritual welfare of his readers is very evident in this passionate and emotional passage. As I read, studied, and reflected upon Paul’s words this week, I observed the *heart of a pastor* and I was challenged, encouraged, and deeply moved.

I discovered that pastoring is a bit like *parenting*, except without the diapers! In this passage Paul uses the image of *birthing* to describe his deep anguish over the spiritual condition of his brothers and sisters in Galatia. As the apostle and evangelist who first visited Galatia, he was an important part of their first steps of faith. He birthed the embryonic Christian communities in Galatia, watched them grow and now he feels the pain of birth once again as they struggle to claim their identity as believers in Christ.

Paul’s impassioned words here remind me of the joys and challenges of parenting. Our children enter this world in a moment of pain and joy and these polarities remain for the rest of our lives. Being a parent is an emotional and spiritual roller coaster ride. From infancy to adulthood, we experience wonderful moments of delight with our children. Yet we also encounter times of difficulty. We birth our children and watch them grow up. Along the way we love them, care for them, teach them and guide them. And we hope that when they go out into the world that they’re well prepared and can make wise decisions. Along the way, though, we experience the full gamut of emotions – happiness, fear, frustration, peace, disappointment, delight, sadness and joy; all borne out of a deep love and concern for our children. While we’re often accused of overreacting, we can’t help but feel this way because we’re concerned about our children.

Do pastors, ministers or priests feel the same way about their parishioners? That is a very complex question. On the one hand, Christian ministry is a profession and ministers are taught to maintain professional boundaries with their congregants. Pastors have an ethical responsibility as leaders to maintain appropriate relationships with the people under their care. At the same time, pastors are spiritual leaders, which necessitates a high degree of involvement in peoples’ lives, often at the most important moments of their lives. The work of a pastor involves walking with people through some of the major transitions of life. Most importantly, pastors also assist people in addressing the larger spiritual issues of life and answering the big questions of existence, such as, who am I, what’s my purpose in life, how can I find meaning, is there a God, and where is God? Pastoring, then, is a rather unique vocation, requiring a certain degree of professionalism and the ability to relate to people on a very deep and personal level. It is a tricky balancing act. It is not just a job; it is a calling.

As I read Paul’s words this week I was struck by his brutal honesty as he expresses his fears, anxieties and disappointments. I suspect that many ministers experience similar feelings as they work in their churches. Yet rising above Paul’s fears is a hopeful vision. Even though he was experiencing labour pains for the Galatians, he realized that something wonderful was being birthed – “Christ . . . fully developed in your lives” (Galatians 4:19). This hopeful vision is why I’m a pastor.

**2. Paul’s Appeal: *Become Like Me***

Paul’s hopes for the Christians in Galatia existed alongside his fears, anxieties and disappointments. He desperately wanted them to be *free in Christ* and not encumbered by a religious point system of accumulating merit. In Paul’s eyes, if his Gentile readers were to start following the Mosaic law, they would be enslaved all over again (Galatians 4:9). But he’s discovered that they were already treading on dangerous ground – “*You are trying to earn favor with God by observing certain days or months or seasons or years*” (Galatians 4:10). Expressing his deep disappointment at the situation, he writes, “*I am afraid that all my hard work among you has gone up in a puff of smoke!”* (Galatians 4:11, *The Message*). Like I said, Paul was being brutally honest. He observed what was happening in Galatia and he felt like a big failure. But all was not lost and Paul wasn’t giving up.

Instead of waving the white flag, Paul makes a direct appeal to his readers, “*I plead with you, brothers and sisters, become like me, for I became like you*” (Galatians 4:12). His words of exhortation here call his readers to become like him and embrace the true freedom that is in Christ. Paul’s faith story, presented earlier in the letter, depicts his journey from persecutor to preacher. By his own admission, he was extremely zealous for the religious traditions of ancestors and he persecuted the church. But Christ freed him from the past, bringing him to the point where he could declare, “*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me”* (Galatians 2:20). This is what Paul desires for his readers – that Christ would live in them. So he holds up his Christ-centred life as an example for them to follow.

At this point you may be saying to yourself, “Boy, that Paul had some nerve presenting himself as a model for his congregation. Isn’t that a potentially risky thing to do? How can we look to any Christian leader as an example when so many of them have failed? Aren’t we to look to Christ alone as our example?” To this Paul would say, “*Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ*” (1 Corinthians 11:1) or “*Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you*” (Philippians 4:9). Spiritual mentors have an important role to play in our faith journeys. As we strive to grow in Christ, we need other Christians around us to encourage and challenge us to continue on the journey. But being a spiritual mentor is not just the task of pastors; all Christians are involved. John Stott states that *all Christians* who have experienced the freedom, joy, and salvation that is in Christ should be able to say ‘become like me’ because they want other people to experience those very same blessings (Stott, *The Message of Galatians,* p. 112). The beauty of Christianity is that it is not a solitary way of life, but one lived in community, surrounded by faithful, living examples of people who are following Jesus. Christian community, then, is a place where we are spiritually mentoring others at the same time as we are being mentored in the Christian life. So, we need to be open to allow both these activities to occur in our midst.

**3. Paul’s Heartbreak: *Where did your joy go?***

Spiritual mentoring, however, is heavily dependent upon positive relationships between people and this was a major problem facing Paul in his interactions with the Christians in Galatia. His rivals, the pro-law preachers had driven a wedge between Paul and his converts in Galatia (Galatians 4:17). As a result, Paul was now regarded as an *enemy* because he preached the true gospel (Galatians 4:16). But it wasn’t always like this.

Once upon a time, the Christians in Galatia had a deep love for Paul that found expression in their profound kindness toward him. He recalls those former days when he first arrived at their doorstep and preached the good news to them. It wasn’t a planned visit because Paul was very ill, so much so that he had to take a break from his missionary work and recover in Galatia (Galatians 4:13). For many of us, having a sick visitor appear at our door would be a most inconvenient situation and even though the Galatians were tempted to reject and turn him away, they didn’t. Instead they rolled out the red carpet and welcomed him, treating him like an angel or Jesus himself (Galatians 4:14). They cared for Paul as he recovered from his weakened state, pulling out all the stops in order to meet his needs (Galatians 4:15).

In this situation of extreme vulnerability and great need, the Galatians responded to Paul with hospitality, care and compassion. They were *joyful* in serving someone in need. So, Paul wonders where this *joy* or *happiness* went (Galatians 4:15). The relationship that they once had has been damaged. No longer their friend, Paul was considered an *enemy* because he told them the truth (Galatians 4:16). Playing at politics, the rival teachers were driving a wedge between the Christians in Galatia and Paul in order to recruit them to their religious party (Galatians 4:17). As a result, division, animosity and rivalry now marked this once joyful, caring and loving friendship. What happened? Could this relationship be healed?

Relationships within churches can be all too easily shattered. While we have the capacity to care deeply for one another, we can also hurt each other. This happens intentionally and unintentionally. But we can’t afford to let conflict divide us and cut us off from each other. In Christ, we have the capacity to forgive each other and be reconciled to our sisters and brothers. If we are to going to help one another to grow in the Christian life, we can’t let fear, suspicion or animosity drive us apart. If we are to mentor one another and be mentored, then we need to become transparent, vulnerable and trusting with each other. This can only happen in an atmosphere of care, compassion, honesty and love.

We’ve got to trust each other enough to tell and to receive the truth. Paul told the truth to the Galatians and he became their enemy (Galatians 4:16). If we are to mentor and be mentored, we need to speak, hear and face the uncomfortable truth about our brokenness, doubt, pain, discouragement and sin. Yet we must also speak, hear and accept the wonderful truth of God’s grace, forgiveness and healing that meets us where we are.

**4. Paul’s Pain: *I am going through labor pains for you***

Even though Paul’s relationship with the Christians in Galatia was on pretty shaky ground, he still had a pastor’s heart for them. This letter is prime evidence of his impassioned efforts for the sake of their spiritual welfare. But his words here clearly expressed his profound care for them - “*Oh, my dear children! I feel as if I’m going through labor pains for you again, and they will continue until Christ is fully developed in your lives.**I wish I were with you right now so I could change my tone. But at this distance I don’t know how else to help you*” (Galatians 4:19-20).

In this passage we can clearly see the good and the bad motives of spiritual leaders. The rival preachers only wanted to lure the Galatians over to their side so that they would become their followers and be enamoured with them, like spiritual groupies. Paul, on the other hand, wanted Christ to be formed in their lives. The focus of spiritual mentoring is not to make people our followers, but to allow God to work in their lives. John Calvin once wrote, “If ministers wish to do any good, let them labour to form Christ, not to form themselves in their hearers” (Stott, *The Message of Galatians,* p. 120). But letting God do his work in people means that we can’t be control freaks. The rival preachers wanted to control the spiritual development of the Christians in Galatia by proposing a set of rules and regulations that they needed to follow in order to be Christians. “Follow the program,” they said, “and you’ll belong.” Paul, on the other hand, left space for God to work in people’s lives, for Christ to become fully developed in them. In some ways, it’s easier to exercise religious control and to manipulate people to behave a certain way. It’s more challenging to trust that God is working in our midst. Eugene Peterson writes, “Freedom comes from trusting, not from manipulating, from leaving matters to God rather than trying to be in control” (Peterson, *Travelling Light,* p. 130). As a pastor and as a parent, I need to let go and let God. Yes, I need to continue to do the important tasks in both these areas, but more importantly, I need to leave room for God’s grace to work in people’s lives. The pain, the work and the concern will not disappear, but there is a freedom in praying that Christ will be formed in you. So we are carried forward by the hope that something wonderful is being born in our midst.

This week I was reading a prayer, attributed to Archbishop Oscar Romero, but actually written by Cardinal Dearden (<http://www.gurteen.com/gurteen/gurteen.nsf/id/L003369/>)

“It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.   
  
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.  
  
We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent  
enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of  
saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.  
  
No statement says all that could be said.  
  
No prayer fully expresses our faith.  
  
No confession brings perfection.  
  
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.  
  
No program accomplishes the Church's mission.  
  
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.  
  
This is what we are about.  
  
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.  
  
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.  
  
We lay foundations that will need further development.  
  
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.  
  
We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.  
  
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.  
  
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an  
opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.  
  
We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master  
builder and the worker.  
  
We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.  
  
We are prophets of a future not our own. Amen”