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

**Sunday October 21, 2018**

**“The Tale of Hagar and Sarah” (Galatians 4:21-31)**

**1. Introduction: *Fly Like an Eagle***

While walking through the forest one day, a farmer found a young eagle that had fallen out of his nest. He took it home and put it in his barnyard where it soon learned to eat and behave like the chickens in his barnyard. One day an ornithologist passed by the farm and asked why it was that the king of all birds should be confined to live in the barnyard with the chickens. The farmer replied that since he had given it chicken feed and trained it to be a chicken, it had never learned to fly. Since it now behaved as the chickens, it was no longer an eagle.

“Still it has the heart of an eagle,” replied the ornithologist, “and can surely be taught to fly.” He lifted the eagle toward the sky and said, “You belong to the sky and not to the earth. Stretch forth your wings and fly.”

The eagle, however, was confused. He did not know who he was, and seeing the chickens eating their food, he jumped down to be with them again.

The ornithologist took the bird to the roof of the house and urged him again, saying, “You are an eagle. Stretch forth your wings and fly.”

But the eagle was afraid of his unknown self and world and jumped down once more for the chicken food. Finally the ornithologist took the eagle out of the barnyard to a high mountain. There he held the king of the birds high above him and encouraged him again, saying, “You are an eagle. You belong to the sky. Stretch forth your wings and fly.”

The eagle looked around, back towards the barnyard and up to the sky. Then the ornithologist lifted him straight towards the sun and it happened that the eagle began to tremble. Slowly he stretched his wings, and with a triumphant cry, soared away into the heavens.

It may be that the eagle still remembers the chickens with nostalgia. It may even be that he occasionally revisits the barnyard. But as far as anyone knows, he has never returned to lead the life of a chicken (<https://bible.org/illustration/you-are-eagle>).

This little story about the eagle that thought he was a chicken illustrates the importance of knowing who you are. So often as Christians we don’t know or embrace our true identity in Christ. In many of Paul’s letters, he hammers away at this issue of identity before he moves on and tells his readers what they must do as Christians. For Paul, identity leads to imperative. In other words, our identity in Christ as people who are loved, forgiven, accepted and free forms the basis for our action in the world. The issue of Christian identity is at the heart of Paul’s exhortation in Galatians 4:12, “Dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to live as I do in *freedom* from these things, for I have become like you Gentiles—free from those laws.” This issue of Christian identity is also at the heart of this morning’s Epistle lesson as Paul declares, “Dear brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman; we are children of the *free* woman” (Galatians 4:31).

So are we free or enslaved? Are we eagles who think they are chickens?

**2. The Tale of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar**

On the heels of his passionate plea to his Gentile readers to follow his example and embrace their *freedom in Christ*, Paul challenges these same readers to rethink their decision to submit to the requirements of the Mosaic law. “*Tell me*,” he inquires, “*you who* *want to live under the law*, *do you know what the law actually says?”* (Galatians 4:21). Paul, then, directs their attention to the Jewish Scriptures and the specific story of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar. His opening words set the stage for the entire section - “*The Scriptures say that Abraham had two sons, one from his slave wife and one from his freeborn wife*” (Galatians 4:22).

The Old Testament figure of Abraham plays an important role in Paul’s argument in Galatians. Paul argues for the primacy of faith in Christ by centering attention on Abraham, who “believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith”(Galatians 3:6). Therefore, “the real children of Abraham, then, are those who put their faith in God” (Galatians 3:7). His argument, then, gets right to the issue of *identity*. The rival preachers in Galatian were casting seeds of doubt in the hearts of Paul’s Gentile converts by suggesting that they were not really *sons of Abraham,* that is, not real members of God’s covenant people. In order to become a member of God’s chosen people, they argued, you’ve got to follow the Mosaic law – get circumcised, keep kosher, observe the special holy days – then you’ll be part of us. Paul’s Gentile readers, wanting to fit in, agreed to follow this pro-law program. Paul responds with a forceful reiteration of the gospel. In the words of John Stott, the gospel “is that good news that we sinners, guilty under the judgment of God, may be pardoned and accepted by His sheer grace, His free and unmerited favour, on the grounds of His Son’s death and not for any works or merits of our own” (Stott, *The Message of Galatians,* p. 54). Our identity as God’s beloved children is not due to anything we have done or will do, but solely upon what Christ has done for us. So, Paul’s Gentile readers didn’t need to jump through the hoops of the Mosaic law in order to belong to God’s family, they were already his sons and daughters because they had responded to God’s invitation and exercised faith in Christ.

Yet questions about their identity in Christ were still swirling around in Galatia and the story of Abraham was central to this important discussion. Certainly, the rival preachers had presented their angle on this story, which made it necessary for Paul to clarify things for his Gentile readers. So, he begins, “*Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and the other by a free woman*,” which takes us back to this epic tale in book of Genesis.

The story of Abraham begins with God’s promise to make him a *great nation* and to bless *all peoples on the earth* through him (Genesis 12:1-3). But there was one tiny problem: Abraham did not have a child; he only had God’s promise that he would have descendants. As time went on, Abraham and his wife Sarah remained childless, leading to Abraham to ask God about the possibility of this promise’s fulfilment since he still didn’t have a child (Genesis 15:2). In response, God reassured Abraham that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars in the sky (Genesis 15:5). So, he believed God (Genesis 15:6). But the years passed and there was still no child. God made a promise but nothing was happening. So, Abraham and Sarah, unable to conceive a child, conceived a plan. Sarah’s slave, he young maid, Hagar, would act as a surrogate and bear a child to Abraham. The plan worked and Hagar gave birth to Abraham’s son, Ishmael (Genesis 16:1-4). But their little plan would result in a lot of grief, conflict and suffering (Genesis 16:4-10; 21:8-21).

A few years later, against all odds, Sarah conceived and gave birth to Isaac. Genesis 21:1-2 reads, “Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him.” Sarah, old and past the age of childbearing, gave birth to the promised son (Genesis 18:11). No wonder she laughed out loud when she first heard the news of this momentous event (Genesis 18:12). It seemed so impossible! But, of course, God is pretty good and making the impossible, possible. Yet so often, we lack faith in God’s plan and time and time again, we try to make things happen in our own strength.

Eugene Peterson offers the following reflections on this story: “The lesson of that old piece of history is clear enough: the moment we begin manipulating lives in order to get control of circumstances, we become enslaved in our own plans, tangled up in our own red tape, and have to live with the grievous, unintended consequences. The life of freedom is a life of receiving, of believing, of accepting, of hoping. Because God freely keeps his promises, we are free to trust” (Peterson, *Travelling Light,* p. 132).

**3. Paul’s Retelling of the Tale**

Paul uses the story of Abraham and his the two sons to drive home his message on *freedom*. In all likelihood, the rival preachers in Galatia used this same story to make their pitch for following the law. They likely stressed that God’s promises were made to Abraham and his true son, Isaac and the only way that the Gentile Christians could share in the promise was through Isaac, which would entail their obedience to the Mosaic law. These rival preachers may have even conceded that the Gentiles were Abraham’s children in the same way that Ishmael was a child of Abraham. But they were quick to point out that Isaac, not Ishmael, was the true son of Abraham and if the Gentiles wanted to be true children of Abraham, they needed to be circumcised and submit to the law.

In response, Paul takes this same story and turns it around on his rivals in order to bolster his readers’ identity in Christ. The central feature in Paul’s retelling of the story is the vivid contrast between Isaac and Ishmael, the two sons born to Abraham. Ishmael’s mother was Hagar, the *slave woman;* Isaac’s mother was Sarah, the *free woman* (Galatians 4:22). Ishmael “was born in a *human attempt* to bring about the fulfillment of God’s promise”; Isaac “was born as God’s own fulfillment of his *promise*” (Galatians 4:23). The contrasting images of this story are then allegorically used to make a key point about salvation history – “These two women serve as an illustration of *God’s two covenants*” (Galatians 4:24). Hagar represents the Mosaic covenant, established at Mount Sinai with the giving of the law (Galatians 4:24). All those who follow the Mosaic law are Hagar’s children and are *enslaved* (Galatians 4:24-25). On the other hand, Sarah represents the New Covenant, established by Christ’s death, enacted by God’s grace and received through faith. All those who live by faith are Sarah’s children and are *free*. Thus, Gentile Christians, those who live by faith in Christ, are children of the *promise* (Galatians 4:28) and are children of the *free woman* (Galatians 4:31).

The stark contrast between these two covenants should cause us to think about our understanding of the Mosaic law. Many Christians have difficulty in sorting out the relationship between their Christian faith and the Old Testament law. We all can agree that doing the law does not make one acceptable before God; only Christ’s sacrifice can do that. Yet there is a tendency to lay the burden of these rules and regulations upon ourselves and our brothers and sisters, claiming that we’ve got to do the law in order to be good Christians. But if we take Paul’s letter of freedom seriously, we need to recognize that we are freed from the law, not only with regard to our acceptance by God, but in the living of the Christian life.

**4. Are we free?**

Sisters and brothers, Christ has set us free. The question that faces each one of us is whether or not we will embrace that freedom or return to a life of slavery. This leads to another important question – What enslaves us? What do we need to be freed from?

For those Gentile Christians in Galatia, following the rules and regulations of the Mosaic law was keeping them from living a life of freedom in Christ. Does that same tendency to follow the rules, do our duty or look religious exist in our lives? What rules, regulations, church structures or traditions do we cling to that enslaves others or us? Maybe it’s time to cast off those burdens and become free in Christ.

Are we like Abraham and Sarah, who grew impatient with God’s timing and tried to make God’s promises happen on their own? Are we enslaved by our tendency to control the situation or to find the quick solution, instead of trusting God to do his work in his time? Are we open to follow God’s direction for our lives and our church? Maybe it’s time to live by faith.

Are we enslaved by our brokenness, our addictions, our past mistakes, or our sins? Do we suppose that we could never be healed, released or forgiven from those things? Are we weighed down with feelings of guilt, self-loathing or unworthiness? Do we work hard at constructing a spiritual façade in order to hide the things that we don’t want others to see? Maybe it’s time to allow Jesus to forgive, to heal, to cleanse and to restore us so that we may be released from those chains.

As a church are we enslaved by our *smallness*? Being small enables us to know and to care for each other. There’s nothing wrong with being a “small church with a big heart.” But does our identity as a small church keep us from being fully engaged in God’s mission and Christian ministry? Do we suppose that we could never attempt to do certain things because we are so small? And yet, time and time again, I am amazed at what God is doing in and through our congregation when we step out in faith. Last night we celebrated and welcomed the Karwana family and I was reminded of the amazing amount of collaboration that went on to make their arrival in Canada happen. Our church played an important role in all of this. We spiritually supported him, advocated for him at the MP office, did creative fund-raising, and waited with him at the airport on that wonderful Friday morning. What would have happened if we had said, “This situation to too big for us to handle”? What if we let our smallness enslave us and we did nothing? This is what we do – in faith, we plant seeds and watch them grow.

“Christ has set us free to live a free life” (Galatians 5:1, *The Message*)