

biblestudy: february 2017

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Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

February 5, 2017 Text: Galatians 3:26-4:7 “Re-created to Live in Harmony”

One would think that grabbing a text such as this one would be like picking the low-hanging fruit. After all, what could be simpler than saying that all believers are made one in Christ? Ah, yes! Christian unity.

Side trip: The letter to the Galatians was written to congregations in what is present-day Turkey. That is still a region fraught with divisions and conflict.

Paul is having to address an issue that just wouldn't go away: Are Gentile Christians equal to Jewish Christians? Paul must have thought the matter was settled; after all, Peter had told about his vision of there being no distinction (Acts 11:12). Paul and Barnabas had quoted the prophet Isaiah: “I have set you to be a light to the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth” (Acts 13:47). Then, there was that Council in Jerusalem that determined “that we should not create problems for Gentiles who turn to God” (Acts 15:19). You might think that should have put the concern to rest.

Side trip: Throughout this letter, Paul keeps trying to find a metaphor or an image that will make his message clear. He talks about birth (2:15). He illustrates from his personal story (1:13-24). He uses the thought of lack of faith being like living in prison (3:23). Paul describes believers as children (4:31). He lists Christian values as if they are fruit (5:22). He even talks about his handwriting (6:11).

February 12, 2017 Text: Galatians 4:8-20 “New Birth Brings Freedom”

As I dug around in this week's study text, I came across an interesting word. Paul uses a form of the word twice: once it is a good thing; once it is a bad thing. But it is the same word.

The base word is *zēō*, a word that usually means “to get hot.” In a figurative sense, it can mean zealous (KJV), really concerned (Common English Bible), make much of it (NRSV), special attention (Williams Translation of the People), giving you the rush (Cotton Patch Version), keen to win you over (J. B. Phillips), or super-excited (Guess Who).

What's wrong with being zealous? What's wrong with getting heated up about something? In Galatians 4:17, Paul says the “excitement” is not for a good purpose, so it is not a good thing. By way of contrast, in Galatians 4:18, the apostle says the “excitement” is a good thing when it is for a good purpose.

Just being zealous is not good enough. Just being “super-excited” is not good enough. Sometimes we are tempted to think that those who seem most energized by their religious journey are bound to be closest to the truth, but Paul cautions the Galatians not to equate “zeal” with “truth.” Passion and enthusiasm are not the same things as truth-telling.

The gift of truth is freedom (Galatians 4:8-9). That freedom is a mark of the new birth in Christ, or, as Paul puts it: “I'm going through labor

The apostle acknowledges that within the family of Christian believers there have been places of separation: ethnic background, legal status, gender identity (3:28). Then, he gives the astonishing news: These things that you thought were so important don't amount to a hill of beans. In Christ Jesus, these barriers are destroyed and baptism has made the playing field level.

Side trip: Paul and Barnabas had established these Galatian communities (Acts 13-14), so the apostle has a special place in his heart for these people. He sometimes contrasts what they used to be when he first knew them with how they are now (1:6-7).

Now I understand why I took these side trips. I don't want to have to face the way we divide up the family of God these days. How about you?

What Someone Else Has Said:

Marco Politi (*Pope Francis Among the Wolves*, Columbia), observed “We are witnessing a rising tide of exits from traditional Christianity, a heightened freedom of choice within the religion professed...”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Come anew, O Lord...”

pains again until Christ is formed in you” (4:19). It is not our enthusiasm that sets us free, but it is the presence of Jesus Christ that sets us free.

The writer tells the Galatians to live with the risk of freedom (4:9). Having a “checklist” of traditions or behaviors that are the way to salvation actually traps us in a slavery to a “weak and worthless world system” (4:9). In the freedom of Christ I do not always get it right, but I am loved by One who has made it right.

Paul reminds the Galatians (and us) that the boundaries some set for the range of Christ's love are not in keeping with what it means to be formed in Christ (4:19). When the goal is exclusion rather than freedom, the *zēō* is “for no good purpose.” When the *zēō* is for invitation, it is filled with good purpose.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Nancy Gibbs and Michael Duffy (*The Preacher and the Presidents: Billy Graham in the White House*, Center Street) have raised this question: “When a man hates injustice but loves order, what does he do if the prevailing order is itself unjust?”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Set me free, Lord...”

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February 19, 2017 Text: Galatians 5:1-17, “Freedom in Christ”

Some time ago, I was given an Amazon Echo. This device can handle all kinds of chores (such as keeping a shopping list, setting the thermostat, telling me the population of Guthrie, Oklahoma, and reporting on the weather in Mattawamkeag, Maine). Also, I can ask it to tell me a joke and (to my friends’ despair) it passes on some witticism that I can share. (“Q.: Why can’t you trust an atom? A: Because they make up everything.”)

In this week’s study text, Paul is acting almost like an Amazon Echo (minus the bad jokes). It seems that he is drawing this letter to the Galatians to a close and he wants to answer question after question after question.

Q.: If I try to live by the Law, won’t that make Christ happy? A.: No. To count on anything other than Christ for salvation is to fall from grace (Galatians 5:2-4).

Q.: What about my life makes any difference to Christ? A.: Faith showing up in love matters to Christ (Galatians 5:6).

Q.: Is it true that “once saved, always saved”? A.: No. Even if you got off to a good start, you must keep on the path (Galatians 5:7).

Q.: Aren’t God’s people the ones who practice circumcision? A.: The cross of Jesus Christ invites God’s people (Galatians 5:11).

Q.: Aren’t we supposed to fulfill the Law? A.: Yes, and the Law is fulfilled in the commandment “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Galatians 5:14).

Q.: How are we supposed to be guided through all this? A.: Let yourself be guided/led/shaped by the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:16).

Q.: In Christ’s freedom, shouldn’t I be able to do whatever I want to do? A.: No. Abandon selfish desires and follow the leading of the Spirit (Galatians 5:17).

What Someone Else Has Said:

Ryan Danker (*Wesley and the Anglicans*, InterVarsity Academic) quotes John Wesley: “You want the life, the spirit, the power, which (the Methodists) have, not of themselves, but by the free grace of God...”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Giver of every good and perfect gift, bring your gift of grace and possibility...”

February 26, 2017 Text: Galatians 5:18-6:10 “Christ Creates Holy Living”

In golf, one wants as low a stroke count as possible. If a golfer is really good, he or she might be able to make par, or even do better than par. Par would be the number of strokes a first-class player might need to complete a hole. Many golf courses are designed so that 72 is considered par for eighteen holes. (My golfing ability might be measured by the fact that I am one of the few people who gave away his golf clubs when he retired!)

What would be a good score on these works of the flesh mentioned in Galatians 5:18-20? What would be considered “par”---the number of violations that a committed Christian might actually commit? In the NRSV translation, there are fifteen items listed. Can we agree that for most of us who are studying this lesson, it is possible that only three or four of these apply? The people who have higher numbers of violations are *those* kind of people. (Oops. Did that just make me guilty of enmity?)

But look at the other side of the coin. Paul also lists nine qualities that are fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). I’m not sure that most of us fare very well on this round. I know too many times I have not loved my neighbor. I am well aware of the occasions when my joy took a hike. There certainly are disturbing moments when peace seems to go away. And don’t get me started on patience! Think about it. It may be the case that we are better at *not doing* bad things than we are at actually *living* the good things.

I have a pastor friend who says he feels he has not really preached the gospel unless he challenges his congregation to grow in sanctification. The title of this week’s lesson makes it clear that “holy living” (or sanctification) is not our own work, but is the creation of Christ within us. The Spirit of Christ gives the harvest (Galatians 6:8).

Now about this thing about par: Paul says we should not compare score with others (Galatians 6:4). In a sense, each of us is playing a different course (Galatians 6:5), so the only test is “How well have I been faithful in the life journey that is mine?”

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Essentials of Wesleyan Theology* (Zondervan), Paul Mickey has said: “The sinner is saved through faith (Ephesians 2:8) and in grace God begins the sanctification process. God’s grace extends to dimensions of salvation, including sanctification. Through sanctifying grace, God begins a purifying process, perfecting the believer in holiness.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Walk with me, Lord Jesus, that Your Spirit might touch my journey with grace. Walk ahead of me, Lord Jesus, that Your Spirit might call me to a good tomorrow...”

News: Church Reduces Food Waste at Campus Kitchen

Statistics from the Society of St. Andrew suggest that 40 percent of food produced in the United States ends up getting thrown away. Metropolitan Memorial United Methodist Church runs The Campus Kitchen at Washington D.C. which collects surplus food and mobilizes student volunteers to turn that food into meals for the hungry and homeless. Being close to several universities, the ministry draws lots of college students who are hungry to serve others.

These kale, squash and tomatoes were headed for the trash. (Voice of volunteer) “On Saturdays, I typically get 4-500 pounds of produce.” But Metropolitan Memorial United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C. has a chef who turns surplus food into made-from-scratch, healthy meals for the homeless and hungry.

Anthony Mickens, Executive Chef of Campus Kitchen of Washington, D.C.: “We get an abundance of meat such as lamb, veal, filet mignon. When the food recovery comes in, I look at what we have and then I do my meal planning.”

Efrem Perkins, Meal Recipient: “It kind of gives you that home-cooked taste.”

Campus Kitchens uses this model in several U.S. cities. Restaurants and groceries supply the food; success depends on volunteers. Raneika White, Campus Kitchen Volunteer: “I’m on dish duty in the kitchen where we’re preparing apple crisp to go out and feed the homeless.”

Metropolitan Memorial partnered with nearby American University, but helping hands come from all over DC and from within the congregation. Kent Weaver, Metropolitan Memorial United Methodist Church: “There are means of making our faith real. They can see the impact of what they do.”

Volunteer: “Fifty pounds of squash. I don’t know what Anthony will do with it but I’m sure he’ll make something good.” The Rev. Charlie Parker, Metropolitan Memorial United Methodist Church: “We waste staggering amounts of food in our country. And so there’s a very profound creation-care piece to the ministry in terms of being good stewards of the food resources that we have.” Pulling in this weekly harvest, preparing 1300 meals, and transporting them all over town takes an enormous ongoing commitment. But volunteers and church members know that every meal makes a difference.

Efrem Perkins “A good meal means the difference between a good and a bad day.”

Anthony Mickens, Executive Chef of Campus Kitchen of Washington, D.C.: “Making sure that no one goes hungry is very fulfilling and sometimes that meal is the only meal that they see for that day.”

Raneika White: “It really makes me proud to be a member of The United Methodist Church, that we’re serving our communities and not just here taking up a space.”