

YOU RAISE ME UP Psalm 133; Galatians 5: 22-6:10

As a seminary student many years ago, I was teased by my classmates for taking a non-required New Testament class at the Catholic union. In spite of being raised as a Catholic child, I had been a Protestant for my entire adult life. They thought I was reverting! I told them I was not reverting, but recovering!

You see, the class I took was devoted totally to the Epistles of Paul and the contextual interpretation of his writings. I knew that there was resistance in many circles to Paul's writings because they had been used historically often to support prejudice and exclusiveness in society, but that was exactly why I wanted to pursue this study. I wanted to understand the context of each writing, If I was going to preach in the local church and exegete these verses in the future, I needed to understand who Paul was writing to; what circumstance he was addressing and what was happening in that new church. Since I had questions, so would all of you! I loved that class because we looked beyond the literal words attributed to Paul and sought the underlying meaning – the dynamic of the word. That was the mantra used in this class – “What is the dynamic?”

Now, we know all of these letters were written long before the Gospels and Paul, after his mystical experience with the presence of Christ, was writing to the early churches, interpreting for them what he believed to be the meaning and purpose of Christ's life and his lessons. Paul was instructing them in his perception of Christ's way.

With that idea in mind, we begin to have a different perception of Paul's letters and interpretation. Here is one who earlier had persecuted those who believed in Christ as Messiah, and now to their surprise, they find him a Christ follower! How his life had changed when he listened to his heart and felt Christ's presence! Today, as we read his words once more, we quickly realize that while the “times might be a'changin'” all around us, the characteristics he describes are still the ideal for our personal lives and for life in the Christian Church. He addresses selfishness and sin, then lists what he calls the “fruit of the spirit:” Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Did you notice that the word “fruit” is singular? It's all together in one package.)

Paul, as one who obeyed the law without question in his previous life, now speaks to the obsession with the law held even by those early Christians and realizes that this is holding them back and causing conflict in the early church. He says, “There is no law against these things.” Even then, people were so pre-occupied with their own creature comforts and their rules and regulations that they failed to pay attention to the Spirit.

He addresses the issues of the early church: “Do not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.” Live by the Spirit and be guided by the Spirit!

Wait! Aren't these the same issues that we address today? Paul spends time teaching the Galatians how to deal with the sin of another: “Restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.” He doesn't want us to chastise or embarrass, but be with one another in gentleness as we discuss our sin. Then he reminds them, and now us, not to become haughty but rather bear the burdens of another. Everyone must carry their own load to be sure, but we should not be so preoccupied with what our neighbor is doing, but rather focus on our own soul.

We know the old saying, “You reap what you sow.” Do we want to sow corruption, or reap eternal life? These few phrases confront us, challenge us, and ground us! After all these lessons, he then tells us not to become weary in doing what is right. Yes, looking at that list – patience, kindness, gentleness..... can be overwhelming. How can we be all those things? But he tells us – don't get tired and weary. Work for the good of all, especially in the family of faith. Work for the good of all.

So what is this all about? What was Jesus' life and message really all about? Relationships! In spite of our attachments to the comforts of our bodies and order in our lives through laws and rules, traditions and rituals and all the ways we've always done things, Paul is telling us that for Jesus, it was always about relationship. That is the most important part of living the Christian life. Rather than adherence to rules and regulations, we look at the heart and needs of one another and develop a relationship in Christ.

Now don't get me wrong, or Paul. I believe in order. I like order in my life. I like things stapled, filed and put away. My dad used to laugh at me when we would learn a new game because I wanted to know the rules – and especially how to win! Even as a child, my mom tells me that the one thing that would upset me the most was when someone didn't play fair or they cheated or lied. I wanted everyone to have a fair shake. Injustice will still get my dander up.

When I look at the life described in the Gospels, there is one thing I know: Jesus' birth, surrounded by the shepherds, angels, wise men from the east; his childhood filled with family and friends, (his parents didn't even miss him right away when they traveled for the holy season) all of it was a lesson in establishing relationship. As he grew up, he was baptized by his cousin in a crowd – not privately. He preached to crowds and invited others to learn from him and then press on with his message. He died publicly and then appeared so his followers would know they were not alone in their ministry.

Christ's church has survived not because of rules or regulations, but because of relationships – because of love. And when the church later strayed from that foundation and became corrupt, it began to fall apart. It's why we sit here today and call ourselves Protestants – protestors! Relationships and love work. They still work today.

A few years ago, my dearest friend and mentor rode with me to a conference six hours from our home church in Florida. Starting out early morning and arriving in time to attend the first session, we later went to the hotel to check in. With only one person at the desk it took time, and with no assistance, we loaded the cart with luggage and went to our rooms.

My room was near the elevator, so Dean helped me unload my luggage. I moved my briefcase away from the door to give him space to bring in my larger suitcase and the door slammed shut. I walked across the room, placed my briefcase on the desk as he opened the door to go to his room. I looked around and one small piece was missing – the one with cosmetics, prescriptions, everything necessary but clothing. I called to ask if he had the missing piece, he looked. He didn't have it. He said he remembered putting the small red bag on the cart downstairs – didn't I have it?

It didn't take long to realize it was gone. In those 30 seconds the door was closed, someone had taken it off the luggage cart. I won't go into all the details of the process of searching and the point of realizing it truly was gone. I sat down on the bed and became quiet. I had to think through all the options. What was missing? What could and could not be replaced? What should I do first? There were things I needed right away like prescriptions that could not be replaced in a timely manner.

During the entire time I sat and processed, Dean simply came over and sat down next to me. He didn't say a word. He just sat and waited. Later, I could not help but think of a song by Josh Groban that we had been playing as we drove along that morning. It begins with these words: "When I am down and oh, my soul's so weary. When troubles come, and my heart burdened be. Then I am still and wait here in the silence, until you come and sit a while with me."

Think about that for a moment. How many times during a difficult time: a time before or after a surgery or when a loved one dies or is terribly ill, has someone come to you and simply sat with you? If they did spoke, I'll bet you don't remember a word they said. You don't remember the words but you remember – they were there. They sat a while with you. It's called "the Ministry of Presence." It's what our lay ministers do all the time.

Dean didn't say anything. Later he told me, "I was afraid to say anything!" We laughed about that. But at that moment, he just sat. When I met with the hotel manager, he sat with me. When I made the police report, he sat with me. And when I asked him if we could just return home, knowing I had no way to replace quickly many of the items taken, he simply helped me pack up my luggage, retrieved his own, and got into the car.

On the six hour return trip home that same night, we began to talk and laugh about all the crazy things that had happened to us over the years when we attended other conferences together; hotel mix ups, horrible food, getting lost, attending a play one time where we were the only two people in the audience and still those actors sang and danced their hearts out. How we cheered!

But we also talked about how blessed we were that we were not hurt – that someone had simply picked up the bag and fled; that it was not my purse with all my cash and credit cards. but especially I told him how blessed I felt not being alone throughout the whole ordeal.

At 2 a.m. when I finally crawled into my own bed, I tried to remember when I felt that kind of security. Just being held up by someone else’s presence; able to see things from a different perspective.

It hit me. I smiled as I remembered as a child, one of six siblings, attending parades in the summer time. The other kids were brave and would push and shove their way through the crowd to get close to the street and pick up candy that was thrown from the floats. My mother would encourage me, but I was not good at pushing – I was short and small and believe it or not, very shy. Even if I said “excuse me” no one seemed to pay attention. So most often I stood next to my dad – my very tall dad.

I can remember him looking down and asking, “Can you see anything?” When I shook my head no, he would reach down, scoop me up and set me on his shoulders. I could see! I could see everything! The candy simply didn’t matter. I was raised up on my father’s shoulders.

Paul’s letter tells us: “Bear one another’s burdens.” Think of the welfare of others. Look out for them. Love them. The refrain from Groban’s song tells us:

“You raise me up so I can stand on mountains; you raise me up to walk on stormy seas. I am strong when I am on your shoulders; you raise me up to more than I can be.”

When you came to this church, you became part of a covenant family. And together we promise to raise others up when they are hurting and allow ourselves to be raised up in our time of trouble. This is not just a sentimental idea – this is a Biblical challenge! We share in the sacraments – we baptize and break bread together. We share in relationships with others. We bear each other’s burdens. We raise each other up to be more than we ever thought we could be. That’s the church of Jesus Christ.

This past week I heard about a ship from one country firing upon a “tender ship.” I was not familiar with that term but it turns out that a tender ship carries no weapons, is no threat to anyone. This is the ship that moves among the others and fixes things – helps them out when they are in trouble. It’s the ship that raises others up when they are in need.

Perhaps that would be a good slogan for a church. “We are the tender ship of society.” We raise you up, we bind your wounds, we soothe your pain, and we fill you with the Spirit of Christ. It’s about raising one another up. It’s about relationship. And it had always been about Christ Jesus – first and foremost. Amen.

Sermon preached by:
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