

ANOTHER WAY

Well seven years, two seminaries and 40 classes later I've just found out that if I make it through my last two Hebrew courses I will graduate with my Masters of Divinity degree and graduate on June 14th. What a journey it's been.

If I wanted to describe my experiences pursuing my theological studies at Claremont and Fuller, I would describe my approaching scripture at Claremont as with a chain saw, the sawdust and the chips flying everywhere. At Fuller, as with an archaeologist's brush, delicately brushing the dirt off each item I found, being careful not to disturb anything while the pottery shards pile up into mountains around me that need to be cataloged and put together. As difficult as the process has been, I've absolutely fallen in love with the bible. I look at it so differently now. It's the narrative around which I shape my life. I'm finding that if I don't reduce it to proof texts it reveals another reality with so much truth and depth, aaaaahhhh, but that's a whole other sermon.

This morning I wanted to juxtapose these two translations because I think that sometimes it is so difficult to feel like we can connect to scripture passages. And if we can't connect to them, they don't matter to us. They can't get inside us and open us up to a larger worldview. They just stay on the surface as "other" information. The first NRSV translation contains all of the familiar language which is chock full of important theological constructs and it is an accurate word for word translation. The second, by Eugene Peterson, is an idea for idea translation. It's interesting that the first translation, which sounds so other worldly and obscure, would have been heard by Paul's first century audience more like the Peterson translation can be heard by us today, and it provides us with *another way* to look at this passage.

Where did the idea for this sermon come from? It's been mounting for a long time. It came from talking with so many people from different denominations and seminaries who had experienced alienation and heartbreak at their churches. I left them asking, *isn't there another way?* It came from hearing from people who longed to find out more about Christianity, but they never felt comfortable in a church because they couldn't buy into theological constructs and the language they heard there. *Why isn't there another way?* It came from people who thought that the bible was either a sledgehammer with which to be hit over the head or a fairy tale to be dismissed. *There's got to be another way!* It came from struggling under the weight of academia and theological doctrines which left me ungrounded and empty, feeling like Eve who had just eaten from the tree of good and evil and was longing for a fig leaf and a place to hide. *God help me find another way!*

Lately I've been thinking a lot about the pilgrimage we made to Turkey a few years ago. It was quite a moving experience to be able to walk in the footsteps of Paul. The Pauline letters mean so much more to me today because of that trip. I am still amazed that I was actually able to speak in the very place in Ephesus as Paul.

I remember wondering why Ephesus was such an important place during its heyday and was told that there used to be a magnificent harbor there. I was shocked; there was no evidence of water. I wanted to know what had happened. The silt had built up and erased the contours of the harbor. It was as though the harbor had never existed at all. The water's edge was now miles away.

It's easy to forget. To let the silt build up and, before we realize it, the original contours of our Christian faith have become obscured. But Paul won't let us. In this passage Paul reaches out from the first century and grabs us by the shirt collar and demands an answer from us. How are we living, by faith or by works of the law? And if we're living by works of the law, what did Jesus die for?

Lent is a time for taking stock. A time for examining where we are if we use the *Way* of Jesus as the plumb line for measuring our lives and the lives of our churches. What is that *Way*? If we reflect upon his desert testing Jesus had one main purpose, to break the alienation between people and God. What Jesus did for the Jews and their 613 laws was the theological equivalent of taking off a too tight girdle and finally being able to breathe! Jesus did more dredging in the first century than we could ever hope to comprehend.

Jesus was implicitly obedient to the will of God. He would not compromise with the ways of the world and its seduction of power and fame. He entered into what God had planned instead of trying to control spirit. Jesus empowered people in their spiritual paths without keeping his spiritual power to himself and a select few. Jesus showed us through his very being how to be in communion with God and each other. Paul could not believe that the Galatian Churches, would trade this spirit filled life of trusting Jesus for the legalism of the Mosaic system of earning their way to God's good graces.

A little background on the Galatians. I can't help it, but I've always identified them as "those stupid Galatians." But then that's easy for me to say. Let's take a deeper look. According to commentaries, they were probably located in the area in southern Turkey. The Galatians were converted directly from paganism, which would have included just about everyone but the Jews and whatever Christians there were. They probably first heard of Torah through Paul's preaching; but they had not lived by it. The community did not have a mature grasp of this identity "in Christ," Paul is not happy, he feels as though he is under attack but he doesn't really know from whom. He believes that the very gospel is at stake.

From ancient times, the deviance Paul struggles to correct has been called "Judaizing" "to live like a Jew." This needs some clarification. Paul is not speaking here about Jews who are practicing their faith or Jewish Christians who follow Jesus. Remember that the first Christians were Jews. This term is appropriate for Gentiles who wish to imitate them.

They question Paul's apostolic credentials. Paul's good news is also deficient. Can you just hear them? *See if you can feel the girdle getting tighter:* "Paul has preached only of God's work in the crucified Messiah. He therefore delivers to the Galatians an incomplete, inadequate form of Christianity. In order to be truly righteous, to be in a proper covenantal relationship with God – it is necessary as well to observe the commandments of Torah. The Messiah is a Jewish savior. Being "in the Messiah" therefore demands becoming part of the historic people, the "Israel of God" as well. Circumcision is the ritual symbol for taking on the yoke of Torah which initiates one into

this people. Paul deceived the Galatians by foisting on them merely the ritual washing of baptism. Like commitment to Christ, it is a beginning, but more is required for full maturity. Obedience to the gospel without obedience to Torah's commandments is, according to Paul's opponents, a superficial and distorted version of Judaism. The ultimate norm for God's righteousness, and therefore for human righteousness, is now – as always – Torah.

If they are circumcised, the Galatians signal their willingness to advance to this more mature position within the people of God. Such an argument would have made excellent sense to those who converted directly from paganism, for multiple initiations signaling stages of introduction into a mystery were a standard feature of Greco-Roman religions.”¹

From *The Dictionary of Paul*, we learn what the motivating factors for their defection might have been. “Evidently their message met a need in the Galatian churches. They may well have felt a loss of identity since their faith in Christ excluded them from both their pagan temples and from the Jewish synagogues. So they sought identification with the Jewish people to gain a sense of belonging to God's people. It also appears that they wanted to come under the discipline of the Mosaic Law because they believed that the Law would give them clear guidance in their moral struggle. In any case, they were mesmerized by the message of the intruders and had become negative toward Paul.”² After reading this I just couldn't judge them as stupid Galatians anymore, because I've caught myself at times struggling with some of these same issues. They couldn't see their theological faces anywhere else outside of their congregation. I've been there. Have you?

As I was working on this sermon, I had to take a break to work on my Hebrew translations. I was working on Psalm 121, but all I had in front of me was the Hebrew text. I spent hours on it. I was so frustrated. The way Hebrew works is that dictionaries are arranged by verb roots. So you have to peel off all the prepositions, prefixes and suffixes to determine the verb root to find the entry. Then you have to go through all of the forms of that verb root to find the definition. ARRRRGGGGHHHHH! As I was doing this, just wanting furiously to be finished so I could get back to this sermon. I started reading aloud the translation as I was completing it. “From”, that's a preposition... “help”...okay that's an adjective... “come”...is a verb... “The Lord,” is that the subject?

After I went through this for hours translating the passage, I realized what the passage said. I'm stressing about the Hebrew and the sermon and the message is: From where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord. I burst out laughing, appreciating God's incredible sense of humor and irony. I'm writing about legalism and its dangers and I'm missing the blessing of what I'm translating because I'm so focused on the “jot and tittle” of the law! I was acting like a Pharisee!

¹ Excerpts from *The Writings of The New Testament* by Luke Timothy Johnson.

² *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*.

As Brennan Manning puts it, “**The genius of legalistic religion is making primary matters secondary and secondary matters primary.**”³ It always ends up killing that which its trying to protect by choking the life out of it. Whether or not it appears to be in the secular realm, legalism is always a spiritual problem of trust. Is legalism choking the life out of anything for you this Lent?

Well as I’ve been contemplating how much I’ve experienced *another way* of living at this church, I am filled with gratitude. It’s been twelve years since I heard the sermon here that changed my life. Twelve years of being part of a community that has truly demonstrated what being The Body of Christ is all about. I’ve learned that there is always *another way* when the spirit of Christ is involved. The way I least expect, the *transcendant way* that allows beauty to be created, impossible relationships to be reconciled, unimaginable goals to be achieved, and broken hearts to be not only mended, but made stronger and more resilient. Over these years the evidence has mounted up in my own life and in the lives around me. I’ve learned that to “have faith” is to trust in the *Way of Christ*, not in the way of the world.

I went to seminary because I felt that I needed to “carry” this *Way* that I’ve been privileged to have been a part of. Recently, I’ve been reading the book *The Congregational Way of Life* by Arthur Rouner and I found in that book our theological face. I wonder, if I took a poll, how many of us know about our church’s heritage? But if you look outside on the church sign, you’ll see Community Church, Congregational. But most of the Congregational Churches have been absorbed into the UCC and if we don’t remember where we came from, this Congregational Way is in danger of disappearing, of silting up like the Harbor at Ephesus.

I thought I’d close with a few excerpts from the book:⁴

“Never did they think for a moment that they had Christ captured in the Bible, that they could chain Him to set forms or words. His was a free Spirit, and our seventeenth-century forebears believed with all their hearts that their worship of Him must be “free” worship.”

“We have been in the habit of regarding ourselves as “low church,” and groups like the Episcopalians as “high church.” And yet in a real sense, we are the ones with a “high” doctrine of the Church. We have a higher view of the way Christ makes Himself known to His Church – a view that demands a higher responsibility from each member. It is a responsibility to love Christ Jesus and serve Him without the help of ecclesiastical authority and canon law; a responsibility to read the Bible, to pray, to give, to worship, and to work as a result of the discipline that Christ Himself imposes upon us.

“Who can come close to Christ without seeing his own prejudices, the cutting unkindnesses so easily perpetrated and the sinful indifference with which one has lived? Slowly the passion grows to right those wrongs.”

³ Manning, Brennan, *Abba’s Child*.
Rouner, Jr., Arthur J., *The Congregational Way of Life*.

“But the great fact for people of the Congregational Way is that Christ made a covenant with His people. He never said Believe these items of theology and you are in. Not Jesus. His word was “follow Me. Come walk with Me. Live with Me, trust Me, learn My Way, be my disciple” It was not theological correctness He was interested in, but personal commitment. What Jesus wanted was willingness to live the new life and to walk in faith with his band of brothers.”

Please pray with me. Dear Lord, it has been so good to spend this time reflecting on what you did for us. Its so easy to lose sight of how much you fought for our freedom, for our reconciliation. How did you do it? You were a model for us to lead us into our full capacity as humans, but we fall so terribly short. But you’ve even made provision for that. You’ve given us the gift of communion. Once again you’ve taken us away from the ritual of sacrificing *to* and shown us *The Way* to commune *with* you. As we eat this bread and drink this wine, we make you a very part of our being working in us and through us, redeeming us. We thank you for showing us that there is *Another Way*. We pray as you taught us saying. Our Father....

Children’s Sermon

Do you ever have a messy room? Sometimes mine would get so messy that I could barely make my way to my bed. What happens when you clean it? Did you feel better? Did you start to find stuff that you didn’t even know you lost? Just a few minutes ago we said the confession of sin. Does anybody know why we do that? Its to clean the room of our hearts, so that we can find God again, cause we’ve got so much junk piled up that we forget that he’s there. So just like after we clean our room and we can make our way back to the warmth and Comfort of our bed, after we clean our hearts we can make our way back to the warmth and comfort of God.

Call To Worship: Psalm 25:4-9

*Show me your ways, O LORD,
teach me your paths;
Guide me in your truth and teach me,
For you are God my Savior,
And my hope is in you all day long.
Remember, O LORD your great mercy and love,
For they are from of old.
Remember not the sins of my youth
and my rebellions ways;
According to your love remember me,
for you are good, O LORD.
Good and upright is the LORD;
Therefore he instructs sinners in his ways.
He guides the humble in what is right
And teaches them his way.*

Galatians 2:15-21

NRSV Translation

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

The Message Translation

We Jews know that we have no advantage of birth over “non-Jewish sinners.” We know very well that we are not set right with God by rule-keeping but only through personal faith in Jesus Christ. How do we know? We tried it – and we had the best system of rules the world has ever seen! Convinced that no human being can please God by self-improvement, we believed in Jesus as the Messiah so that we might be set right before God by trusting in the Messiah, not by trying to be good.

Have some of you noticed that we are not yet perfect? (No great surprise, right?) And are you ready to make the accusation that since people like me, who go through Christ in order to get things right with God, aren’t perfectly virtuous, Christ must therefore be an accessory to sin? The accusation is frivolous. If I was “trying to be good,” I would be rebuilding the same old barn that I tore down. I would be acting as a charlatan.

What actually took place is this: I tried keeping rules and working my head off to please God and it didn’t work. So I quit being a “law man” so that I could be God’s man. Christ’s life showed me how, and enabled me to do it. I identified myself completely with him. Indeed, I have been crucified with Christ. My ego is no longer central. It is no longer important that I appear righteous before you or have your good opinion, and I am no longer driven to impress God. Christ lives in me. The life you see me living is not “mine,” but it is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I am not going to go back on that.

Is it not clear to you that to go back to that old rule-keeping, peer pleasing religion would be an abandonment of everything personal and free in my relationship with God? I refuse to do that, to repudiate God’s grace. If a living relationship with God could come by rule-keeping, then Christ died unnecessarily.