Sermon on Pentecost 4 Proper 11 2016
Galatians 2:15-21 (w/ glances at 1 Kings 21 and Luke 7:36-8:3)

There’s a well-known and funny story told about Margaret Thatcher during the time she was Prime Minister. She was visiting a care home, going from room to room, meeting some of the senior citizens who’d lived there for a long time.

One old lady showed no sign of realizing that she was shaking hands with a world-famous politician, “Do you know who I am?” asked the Prime Minister; “No, dear,” replied the old lady, “but I’d ask the nurse if I were you; she usually knows!”

Of course, the dementia that many of our senior citizens suffer from is no laughing matter no matter how funny an anecdote in the telling.

But the story illustrates something very powerful about the process of living into our identity as Christians.

The Christian journey is, in large part, learning from scratch who we are!

This is precisely what people who’ve suffered severe memory loss need to do; It is what people who suffer other kinds of loss have to do: it’s the journey refugee families new to Abbotsford are on.

In some ways, whenever one of us or a family member goes through a major transition, we need to re-learn who we are.

Paul, in one of the most influential texts in the entire New Testament, is trying to help us understand this very thing but in terms of our identity in relationship to God: we need to lose an identity and reconstruct another.

We run aground on dangerous rocks when we lose the sense of Paul’s understanding of how deeply transformative this renewed identity might be; we humans are experts at domestication; we want to tame religion so that its, well, just religion.

And when we do the boat we’re on hits the rocks. This is what was happening in Galatia in the early 50’s A.D. The Holy Spirit, working through Paul and others had started some house churches, small groups of people who had experienced the liberation of Jesus Christ

Crazy, amazing things were happening; slaves and masters were eating together; women were taking leadership in a culture where they weren’t allowed to and Jews and Gentiles, separated by centuries of hostility were embracing each other in the Peace of Christ.

It was a new society, new creation in the midst of a stratified and patriarchal Greco-Roman society with all its multitude of religions, superstitions and philosophies.

Under the leadership of the Spirit, people were living into a new identity; it was difficult, stretching, but man was it exhilarating.

Part of this new identity was to offer the hospitality of God to the stranger, welcome the visitor from wherever he or she came from.

One day several folks showed up; they looked exhausted, they were hungry and thirsty and they needed a place to sleep.

The Church made a place for them; the next morning the group explained that they had come from the mother Church in Jerusalem. The leaders and people of Galatia were honoured and moved that the place where this new society had started would make the trek all the way to Galatia.

Not only that, the group from Jerusalem identified themselves as “teachers from Jerusalem,” people who knew the ins and outs; people who understood theology; people of deep insight.

“You people are doing amazingly well,” the teachers said, “thank-you for your hospitality! As we’ve observed you we think we can help you! If you’ll add just a few things to your beliefs, things will work even better for you; things will go smoother; you’ll line up better with the way we practice the faith in Jerusalem!”

And so it began/begins, the fatal compromise, the turn from living into a new identity to the seemingly innocuous but ultimately fatal: “just one more thing,” “just one more rule,” “one more addition.”

It’s not that rules, techniques to deal with bad habits, practices that help us pray more effectively, even peculiar practices that help connect us to our heritage are wrong; many of them are profoundly helpful.

The laws that the teachers attempted to impose on the Galatians, the laws of circumcision, eating kosher and Sabbath were incredibly important for the Jewish nation and even for Jewish Christians living in and around Jerusalem.

Indeed I think many Anglicans have stopped, to their disadvantage, really powerful parts of our Tradition: things like the practice of daily prayer and scripture.

Our rule of life found on p. 555 of the Book of Common Prayer outlines a path of Christian Living that can be tremendously fruitful if lived into over time.

But what is at stake here is identity; we have the privilege of living into Anglican practices not because we have to but because the wisdom contained in them has been crafted over time to help us realize that we are dead to our old identity and alive to a brand new one!

This may seem like an exercise in semantics but it actually makes all the difference in the world!

The Galatians were creating a new world: a world founded on a powerful world-changing message: “He loved me and gave himself for me.” An experience and knowledge of God, not as one of the arbitrary gods of the pantheon but of the One God’s deep love, self-giving love to all people regardless of social or ethnic status.

This was an identity birthed in love, the word “forgiven” pinned on the cradle of that birth; birthed into love which called for only love in return; not for the addition of particular traditions that would have made these Gentile believers into second-class Jews!

Jesus’ New Commons is founded on a New Love issuing from a New Heart, not a New Law imposed on Old Hearts.

Rules allow the inner core to remain unchanged while the outward behaviour looks different.

The problem with religion as rules is that when push comes to shove the heart always wins; rules and traditions never change the heart.

When jobs get scarce, the old tribal divisions kick in, women are put in their place (quote, unquote) and all the old hatreds arise to the surface.

General Romeo Delaire, in his astounding memoir, *Shake Hands with the Devil* talks about an Easter Service he attended just before the start of the genocide in Rwanda.

I paraphrase, “Here I sat, on a beautiful morning, worshipping and praising God alongside people who in a few days would be killing those who sat beside them in the most horrific and barbarous ways possible; no mercy shown, even to the elderly, women or children.”

The deeper identity was Hutu vs. Tutsi not a new identity as Brothers and Sisters in Christ.

Today we face the spectre of so-called Bible-believing Christians in the United States voting for a man who has made openly racist and misogynist statements; who brags about his multiple “sexual conquests” and who routinely lies as if it’s a matter of everyday speech.

The justification is that “times are tough and the average white Christian male is finding the job market difficult.”

We shouldn’t be surprised! The majority of the Church, in whatever place and time has sided with “the Jerusalem teachers” and though paying lip service to Paul out of the side of the mouth that says what he wrote is Holy Scripture, out of the outer side has said, we need to add this or that for it to “really take hold.”

“Paul’s not realistic enough; when push comes to shove, rules will save us!” Except they can’t and they don’t! ***Only a transformed identity has that power!***

And so, just in the last century we have Lutherans embracing Hitler, Anglicans embracing the worst parts of colonialism (including Residential Schools), Serbian Orthodox killing Croatian Catholics; Rwandan Catholics killing other Rwandan Catholics and American Baptists lynching African American Baptists and on I could go.

So what is the good news? Is there good news? All I can do is proclaim that the Holy Spirit is as committed as ever to the good news of this text: “He loved me and gave himself for me!” I really can be “crucified with Christ” that is “dead to me” and alive to my new identity in Christ.

We really can sit at the table with Jews and Muslims and agnostics; they don’t have to become like me and I don’t have to become like them! We really can learn, from a commitment to the faithful love of God, learn to listen, learn to dialogue, learn to ask open and generous questions!

We can practice the table fellowship imaged in our gospel and from a place of faithful love witness to the faithful love of God that seeks to include and not simply “make others like me.”

The ancient Israelites had an understanding that their identity was with and in their King. That’s why the behaviour of a bad king like Ahab was so devastating for the nation. Paul takes this idea over and says, as someone called by the loving and forgiving God, our identity is in the true King: Christ!

***That’s all we need!*** There is a King who is creating a new human family, a new commons built on self-giving, faithful love. That’s what our practice of worship celebrates.

When we gather to worship the question is always an open one: are we here to repay that debt of extravagant love with an act of our own extravagance, a new commitment to repay love with our own love: our time, talent and treasure or are we here to judge, like the Pharisee, that people here and in the wider community don’t add up because they don’t believe what I believe or because they don’t express their worship the way I do, or…(add other reasons)?

Do you know who you are? I’d ask Christ if I were you; he usually (always) knows!