

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"Living by Faith"

Scripture: Galatians 1:13-17; 2:11-21 and Luke 18:9-14

Hymns: God, we praise you for the morning 436 (1-3, 5), Come, children, join to sing 377, My hope is built on nothing less 349, King of Kings 1980, I'm gonna live so God can use me 648, There is a redeemer 1982, You are my king 1996

Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 21, 2017

Rev. Steve Filyk

Right down the hill from us on Battle and 4th Ave
Is the Kamloops Community YMCA.

It's a great facility.

It's got a pool and hot-tub.

It offers child-minding.

It has all sorts of classes

And all sorts of equipment

Designed to keep you healthy

In body, mind, spirit.

Right down the hill is the Kamloops Community YMCA.

But just because you live in the **Kamloops community**,
Doesn't mean you they will let you enter.

You need to sign up.

You need to pay a fee.

If you don't become a member,

If you don't flash your card

They won't let you in.

Most groups and activities we take part in

Have their some requirements for membership.

Whether you give money or offer service

You need earn your keep.

Which begs the question...

Are there things we need to do

gain a place in God's family?

Can we earn a right relationship with God?

PAUSE

In today's Gospel lesson we witness another conflict

About the role of the Jewish law

In the expanding Christian community.

This conflict arises in Antioch.

Antioch was a thriving center of Christian witness

about 300 miles from Jerusalem

On the north-east corner of the Mediterranean.

Antioch was the first place

Where followers of Jesus were called 'Christians'.

And it is in Antioch that a new custom emerges:

"Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians

would eat together at the same table."ⁱ

This was a radical innovation

In the relationship between Jews and Gentiles:

Christ brought the different races together at one table.

But at some point

A group came from Jerusalem came to Antioch

and pressured the Jewish Christians

To withdraw from this table fellowship:

A strong-arm tactic to encourage the Gentile Christians

To keep the Jewish law.

When Paul finds out about this he gets angry.

In particular, he gets angry at Peter.

Peter had been part of this united fellowship.
 But under pressure from 'circumcision faction' Peter flip-flops
 And many others follow his lead.

So why is Paul so upset with Peter
 and this movement
 to embrace the law more thoroughly?

I mean when Paul takes Timothy as a travelling companion
 And fellow-missionary,
 Paul has Timothy circumcised.ⁱⁱ

In the book of Romans
 Paul speaks of the covenants as gifts.ⁱⁱⁱ
 He says that "the law is holy,
 and the commandment is holy and just and good."^{iv}

Paul himself was a Pharisee
 Who had been zealous for the traditions of his ancestors.

So why does he get angry
 When the Gentiles are asked
 To honor their Jewish 'spiritual' heritage
 by keeping a few rules.

Well for Paul it is part of a bigger issue
 Of what justifies us or saves us;
 What makes us members in God's family.

For centuries the law was for the Jewish people,
 a sign of their identity as God's people.
 Many believed that keeping this law
 Was a way of maintaining this relationship.

And yet Paul, a student of the law,
 knew that no-one ultimately kept it.
 Paul, a student of the law,
 Knew that it couldn't save anyone.

For Paul, the law's main benefit
 Was to reveal the peoples' inability
 To live up to God's expectation.

The law was a mirror
 That helped them see their need for a Savior.

What Paul knew from his own life
 Was that it was God's grace, not the law
 That brings us salvation.
 God's grace is what makes us members in God's family.

Paul argues that Peter should know this, declaring:

"We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles
 know that a person is not justified by the works of the law,
 but by faith in Jesus Christ."^v

[Some scholars argue the better translation
 is not 'faith in Jesus Christ'
 but the 'faith' or 'faithfulness OF Jesus Christ'.^{vi}]

'A person is not justified by the law
 but by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.'

Paul is steaming mad
 Because Peter is implying
 That keeping the law
 guards your place in God's family.

Even when he knows that
 "no one will be justified by the works of the law".^{vii}

At the same time, this law-keeping
 creates second-class citizens
 Within the Christian community.

Those who keep the Jewish law,
 And those who do not.^{viii}

So you may be wondering what all of this
 Has to do with us?
 People who live in the community of Kamloops in 2017.

This passage raises an important question:

Are we tempted, like the Galatians,
 To start thinking that it is our action, our behavior
 Which earns our place, our membership, in God's family?

Do we think that our status as God's children
 Is something that we maintain
 Or achieve?

It's easy enough to start thinking so...

The fact we contribute to the church,
 Through our participation and service,
 May make it seem like we are "earning" our place here.

The way we talk sometimes reinforces this impression.
 We tend to speak highly of those who attend worship regularly,
 of those who are generous
 with their financial resources or their time.

We say "she is a long-serving member"
 Or that "he is faithful at worship".
 We seem to be implying that by their behavior
 They have somehow earned their place
 In God's family.

But I think that if Paul was here,
 Paul would remind us,
 That our present-day practise of the law:

Honoring the Sabbath,
 offering tithes and offerings,
 serving in the community
 Are not ways that we can buy our membership

Even ways of conclusively demonstrating
 who is 'in' or 'out' of God's family.

Paul would argue that it is not our work, our efforts
 That earn our place in Gods' family;
 Our membership is gratuitous:
 100 percent gift.

A gift that, when it is received,
 Changes hearts and reforms desires
 Making us eager to grow in the faith
 And to have fellowship with Christian brothers and sisters,

Giving us compassion for our neighbors
 And joyful in the generous sharing of our gifts.

These activities flow out of the lives
 Of those who are members in God's family.
 But going to church, putting money in the plate,
 Serving coffee after the service
 Or even getting circumcised
 will **not** make you right with God.

As Paul says 'A person is not justified by the law
 but by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.'^{ix}

Most of you know I'm a member of the Canadian Forces Reserves.
 I have a membership card to prove it.

But my status in the reserves
 Is contingent on my ability to demonstrate my commitment:
 Join in the weekly parade nights,
 Keep up with my professional development,
 Serve my soldiers well.

Keeping this card,
 Guarding my membership
 Is contingent on my performance.

If I take an extended holiday,
 They will change my status to 'non-effective strength'
 And I will be in the process of 'heading out the door'.

That's the military.
 They say you're either moving up or moving out.

But it's very different here in Christ's church.

Our membership isn't based on our performance,
 But the work of our Savior.

Do you think you owe something?
 Well the invoice says 'paid'.
 Are you worried about losing your place?
 Well your card has no expiry date.

I wonder how a greater appreciation of this 'security of place'
 Might change the nature of this community.

I think I would expect to see a little more joy
 As I watch those engage in service.
 I mean whether you're whacking weeds
 Or pouring coffee you aren't begrudgingly
 paying off a debt,
 you are celebrating God's goodness.

I think I'd also expect to see less focus
 On getting wayward friends and family to Sunday worship.

I mean sitting in the pews
 won't earn your membership in God's kingdom.
 Worship is a response of those who already know they belong.

And so I would expect to see less of a focus
 On getting wayward friends and family to a Sunday service
 And more prayer and purposeful action
 Directed to helping them experience God's grace.

For those who encounter that grace
 Are transformed by it.

May we recognise God's grace,
 May we experience it again and again.
 And may we know in our heart of hearts
 That it is because of the faithfulness of Christ
 We are members here.

ⁱ Info about Antioch all from N.T. Wright *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians 21*

ⁱⁱ Acts 16:3

ⁱⁱⁱ Romans 9:4

^{iv} Romans 7:12

^v Galatians 2:16 NIV

^{vi} "...there is growing agreement among exegetes, based on studies of Greek idiom in both the Old Testament (LXX) and the New Testament, that the subjective

reading of the genitive... is to be preferred, The Faith of Jesus Christ." Thomas W. Gillespie "Galatians 2:15-21" *The Lectionary Commentary: Acts and the Epistles 285*

^{vii} Galatians 2:16 NRSV

^{viii} see *The Student Bible* with notes by Philip Yancey and Tim Stafford, Zondervan Bible Publishers 1024

^{ix} Galatians 2:16 my translation