

**Lectionary 13C**  
**Grace Lutheran Church**  
**Lakeland, FL**  
**June 26, 2022**

**I Kings 19 & 2 Kings 2**  
**Psalm 77**  
**Galatians 5:1, 13-25**  
**Luke 9:51-62**

Grace to you and peace from God and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Christ.

Please pray with me...

The text for our consideration today is found in these various verses from St. Paul's letter to the church in Galatia – *For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

Melody is my dear friend of many many years. Her husband was one of my pastors as I was discerning call to ministry. I asked Melody one time what she wanted to hear in a sermon. She paused for a moment and then said, among other things, "I want to leave church having learned something I didn't know before." So, with Melody's words in mind, I want us to consider Paul's letter to the Galatians. I hope that you leave worship having learned something that you didn't know before.

Paul's letter to the church in Galatia is one of the Epistles that Brother Martin Luther found essential to a right understanding of the Christian faith. It was critical to the early church, to the reforming church and to the church today

This letter was written to second generation Christians, Christians whose only Bible was the Hebrew Bible, that is what we call the Old Testament, and a few scattered writings that were making the rounds – letters by Paul, others who recorded Gospel accounts, other followers of leaders who penned letters, treatises and sermons. These were not organized into anything like our New Testament today. These were Christians who knew what it meant to be Christian by how they treated each other and lived together and learned from those in the faith before them.

Churches met in homes. There were no church buildings. Prominent leaders began to emerge but there was no administrative structure, no committees, no church councils. People and leaders were working very hard to figure out what it meant to be a Christian and to be Christians in life together.

Galatia was an area of Asia Minor, a good distance from Jerusalem, indeed from Israel. It was a Roman Colony and there was a Jewish community there and some were Christians.

But then things began to get a little complicated. You see, there were also Gentiles there and some of them became Christians. And there was great joy and rejoicing. But then factions developed and some Jewish Christians believed that these new ones would do well to follow the Torah and to

observe Jewish practices – such as circumcision and the dietary laws – because that’s just how we do it, doncha know.

It was as if they were saying, “Yes, we know that the Holy Spirit has come to you and that you are followers of Jesus. Yet, we think it would be best if you would go a step further and become like us or at least not make your different-ness from us so so obvious.”

Now, if they didn’t follow Torah, well, ok I s’pose but “you know, if you don’t, well, why don’t you keep your practices over on that side of the street and let us follow what we really know to be the best way.” And the Church, the very Body of Christ became divided over how the works of the law applied to followers of Jesus. Paul was angered, nearly beyond words, at this situation for I think two basic reasons.

First, the attempt of the Jewish Christians to impose on other Christians the observance of the works of the law. And this created a reliance on something other than the Gospel of Jesus. And in this way it served to shrink and truncate and thwart that which God in Christ has done for us, that in which we are free. That freedom for which Christ has set us free. Free of the yoke of the law. Free to serve and free to love one another.

Second, it created divisions in the very Body of Christ. The Jewish Christians sat at a separate table, if you will, a table at which “proper” table manners were observed. Sure, we can share a meal with those others, but let’s not get too close. Not one table but two.

So, what difference does any of this make to us today?

There is no shortage of things that divide the church these days and we are in the middle of a demonstration of that division today. But it isn’t only one issue that the church struggles with – there are questions of doctrine, worship practices, music styles, social justice matters, and the list goes on.

As I think back, some events come to mind – events driven by hate and contempt and “otherness.” June 17, 2015 Dylan Roof, confirmed in an ELCA congregation, was welcomed into a prayer meeting at Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston and killed 9 people because they were black. On June 12, 2016 49 patrons of the Pulse Club in Orlando were killed; a club known as an LGBTQ gathering spot. On October 1, 2017 60 were killed in Las Vegas as they attended an outdoor concert. On February 14, 2018, in Parkland FL 17 teens were killed by one who suffered with emotional issues throughout his young life. On May 25, 2020 George Floyd, a black man, was murdered setting off days of protest around the world. On May 14, 2022 ten black people were gunned down while doing the ordinary task of grocery shopping. And, of course, ten days later 21

people including 19 elementary children died at the hands of an 18 year old equipped with an assault style rifle and high capacity magazines holding over 300 rounds of ammunition. God grieves.

Some of these were motivated by contempt for the victims. Others may have happened because of the desperation of the attacker. And, of course, this is only a partial list. We all remember the despicable actions of the Westboro Baptist Church picketing at funerals in attempts to promote their view of God condemning others and punishing them for various reasons. And across so many denominations, the issue of sexual misconduct by clergy and other leaders has wounded hundreds, maybe thousands, over decades. God grieves.

And closer to home perhaps, we are aware of the complaining and factions that can form even in churches like ours – where worship practices and interior decorating styles and personalities become fodder for divisions. And God grieves.

To the Church in Galatia and to us, Paul says, “because you are free, you are to serve one another. The whole of the law is found in the word of LOVE.” And it is this love that helps us move from two tables to one. One in Christ. Together in Christ. United in mission. One at the Font and one at the Table. One. One in this community of faith. One gathered together. One.

In today’s Gospel reading Jesus is teaching his followers what it means to follow, the single-minded focus required, the need to discard the social amenities of rituals and customs – even those as cherished as the burial of the dead and the embrace upon partings. We can imagine Jesus saying, “Yes, I know you have always done it this way, and I know you prefer it like that. I know. Still, get on with it. Move on and follow me.”

What I love about this is that Jesus doesn’t tell us to forge our own way. Instead he promises to lead and beckons us to follow. Lo, I am with you always. And as we follow we come to a place of suffering and self-sacrifice. A place in which we see that in Christ we have been freed – freed to serve, freed to love, freed to be. A place in which we set aside our personal view of things. In this we are free – free because Jesus has gone before us.

And this freedom is our call – a call that we live out in our love for one another.

No conditions on our love. None.

We love each other – indeed, all of God’s people, because God first loved us. And they’ll know that we are Christians by our love (*sing*)

Thanks be to God.