

Year C, 2nd Sunday after Pentecost

May 29th, 2016

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Galatians 1:1-12

Gospel Verses Religion

Last Sunday, during joys and concerns, Mike E. noted that the world was getting into war over religion where one religion was pitted against another. I found myself spontaneously responding in a way that surprised me. I said I thought there was a difference between religion and gospel and that gospel or “Good News” critiques all religion including Christianity. I then said that Jesus, if he was any religion at all, was Jewish and saw himself as critiquing his own religion though I think he understood the implications for all religions. As I said this I realized I had leaped several fences in a single bound and doubted you understood what I was talking about. I then added, “We will need to talk about this some more.”

Well as it turns out this Sunday our lection moves to the book of Galatians and we have it for the next six weeks. This is the book from which I had gathered these powerful ideas in the first place. I didn’t do this on my own. I found these ideas in J. Louis Martyn’s interpretation of Paul’s letter written to the Galatians in Martyn’s Anchor Yale Bible Commentary published in 1997. It’s a 500 page book on this six chapter letter that has stirred up tremendous interest in Pauline studies because it offers new insight into the issues with which Paul and the early church struggled and these issues turn out to be many of the same ones that confront us still.

Martyn, who died on June 4th, 2015, was a highly respected Biblical scholar who lived his faith in relation to his students. His ideas have invigorated a conversation that I believe is part of a rediscovery of the gospel for our time.

I want to give you some background on the Book of Galatians so that you will see how I can make these sweeping statements. Galatians was written to two or three churches that Paul started in Galatia. Galatia is an area in north central Asia Minor, now Turkey, inhabited by Celts, the same people that settled in Ireland and Wales. They had been conquered by the Romans and domesticated so to speak. There were no Jews living in Galatia and so the churches were composed entirely of gentiles. This is important.

Martyn writes:

The birth of these churches gave great joy both to Paul and to the Galatians themselves. Indeed, in those early days the Galatians were not only enthusiastically thankful to God for their common life of mutual affection in Christ, they were also in love, as it were, with Paul, finding him to be the true messenger of the true God.

So Paul was very important to the Galatians having introduced them to their new faith and they knew him well. At the time of the writing of the letter to the Galatians Paul has moved west to cities around the Aegean Sea when word comes that the churches of Galatia are in serious trouble.

Christian Jewish evangelists had arrived in Galatia and they present a gospel different than the one the Galatians had embraced from Paul. The new people say the Galatians must submit to Jewish cultic rules if they want to be right with God. This means that all males must be circumcised, they must observe Jewish kosher food laws, and they must keep the Sabbath if they want to be true followers of Jesus. Claiming authority from the mother church in Jerusalem they say Paul has been leading them astray.

Here is the problem. The minute we divide the world between Jews and non-Jews we have an “in” and an “out.” We give ourselves criteria by which to separate “these” people from “those” people and we enter the world of religion. It doesn’t matter what religion we are talking about. The problem is in the dividing. The “good news” of Jesus is that there is no “in” and “out.” God loves all his children. Selecting some to be “in” and others to be “out” is a human thing produced by a humanity that does not want to recognize God as their Creator and Lord no matter what name they give God. All of this has been revealed on the cross where God became human and allowed humans to judge God as “out,” thus revealing what we do to each other. This is how we can differentiate gospel from religion and it’s what Paul sees happening to the Galatians who are being told they must give up their freedom in Christ and become religious; that is embrace an identity that divides. Religion divides, gospel unites. To the extent that we have made Christianity into a religion that divides, it has ceased to be the gospel.

The Galatians had experienced the joy of knowing they were included as God’s children just as they were, as Celts. That was the good news Paul preached. Now these people from Jerusalem were saying Paul was wrong on all that and they needed to adopt a whole system of rules and rites that gave them an identity over and against others.

The false teachers, as Paul calls them, were introducing huge amounts of anxiety and then offering to resolve the anxiety by forcing the Galatians to keep these rules that Paul knew would imprison them again. It is the age-old method of instilling anxiety and then offering solutions to quell the anxiety that you have just instilled. (Our politicians often do this.) It was all built on fear yet the good news that Paul preached announced that all are God’s children and no one need be afraid. Since there were no divisions separating people, the gospel removes the reason for anxiety at its source. Before their conversion the Galatians had lived in fear due to their superstitions. Now these religious teachers were saying the Galatians need to live in fear again because they weren’t living by what the false teachers called “the law of God” that separates true follows from false ones.

When word got back to Paul he became alarmed and wrote his letter hoping to get them back on track. The letters were meant to be read out loud during worship probably by the same messenger, now returned to Galatia, who told him of the problems. Paul knows the false teachers will be among the audience eager to pounce on his every word. And remember Paul isn’t saying that Jews should not be circumcised and live in light of their culture. No, he is saying this is unnecessary for non-Jews and if forced on them, a denial of the Good News of Jesus.

With this as background I want to read the first twelve verses of Paul’s letter to the Galatians, our Epistle lesson, as translated by J. Louis Martyn. I will make some brief comments as we go.

Paul, an apostle—that is to say a person who has been sent on a mission; sent, however, not by a group of other human beings, nor even by an individual human being, but rather

by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the realm of those who have died (Paul's authority doesn't come from the mother church or other humans but rather from a revelatory experience of Jesus who was sent from God)—and all of the brothers and sisters who are with me; to the churches of Galatia: May grace and peace come to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ, " who gave up his very life for our sins," so that he might snatch us out of the grasp of the present evil age, thus acting in accordance with the intention of God our Father. To God be glory throughout the whole of eternity. Amen! (With this "Amen" Paul acknowledges that they are gathered in the presence of God.)

I am amazed that you are so rapidly defecting from the God who called you in his grace, and are turning your allegiance to a different gospel. Not that there really is another gospel; but the point is that there are now among you some persons who are frightening you and whose preaching shows that they wish to change the gospel of Christ into its opposite. Regardless of who might preach it—whether I myself or an angel from heaven—if someone should preach to you a gospel contrary to the gospel I preached to you, let him stand under God's curse. As I have said before, I say now once again, if someone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you originally received, let him stand under God's curse. (Paul cares about these people is using very strong language! He doesn't understand how they could so quickly forget the good news and turn to a new form of subjugation.)

Am I now engaged in rhetorical arguments designed to sway the crowds; or am I intent on pleasing God? Do I seek merely to please human beings? If I were still doing that, I would not be a slave of Christ. For, concerning the gospel preached by me, I want you to know, my brothers and sisters, that it is not what human beings normally have in mind when they speak of "good news." (The usual usage of "good news" was as an announcement of a military victory achieved by the Romans.) For I did not receive it from another human being, nor was I taught it; it came to me by God's apocalyptic revelation of Jesus Christ.

("Apocalyptic revelation of Jesus Christ" refers to Paul's powerful and dramatic encounter with Jesus when, long after his crucifixion and ascension, Jesus appears to Paul on the road to Damascus and tells Paul he is a man of violence who in his persecutions is attacking Jesus, God's Messiah.)

I hope this helps you understand how I see the difference between Gospel and religion. This understanding will help us stay out of wars between religions and preserve the gospel that unites us all as brothers and sisters, children of God, by whatever name we call God. Amen.