

A Life Worth Living

Galatians 1:11-24

Reverend Anne Benefield

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Introduction: Before I begin, I have an admission: On Thursday, while I was reading about this Scripture lesson, I fell asleep. Now it isn't really a boring passage, but I'm going to do my best not to put you to sleep. If I look up and people are drifting off, I'll stop and we'll go have our picnic!

Galatians was the first letter that Paul wrote, which means it was written before the Gospels were written down. (Remember this was an oral culture, so the stories of Jesus were shared by careful memorization.) As would be his pattern in later letters, Paul was writing because he had heard of a problem in the churches of Galatia.

The problem was that there were teachers who said that to be a believer one had to be circumcised. Paul who was the apostle to the Gentiles didn't want the message of grace muddied with extra requirements. To prove that requiring circumcision was not the case, Paul writes of his own experience. Starting in vs. 1, "Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead..."

Paul doesn't waste any time getting to the point. He says in vs. 6-7: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—⁷not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ."

It is from Paul's letters that the Reformation proclaimed that it was God's grace that saved us, not our good works. Paul explained that the Gospel is pure grace.

Galatians 1:11-24

¹¹For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; ¹²for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. ¹³You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. ¹⁴I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. ¹⁵But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased ¹⁶to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, ¹⁷nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus. ¹⁸Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; ¹⁹but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother. ²⁰In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! ²¹Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, ²²and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; ²³they only heard it said, "The

one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.”²⁴ And they glorified God because of me.

Prayer: Gracious God, so often we forget that it is Your grace, Your faith, Your love demonstrated through Jesus Christ that brings us to new life. Open our hearts to Your message for we know You have a message for each of us. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

A life worth living...I think that is what we all want, but sometimes it is hard to figure out what would be a life worth living for us. I'm not exactly sure what it means, either, but I do know that Paul lived a life worth living. As we explore this kind of strange passage, Paul speaks to the issue using his own experience.

The first lesson that Paul can teach us is to be passionate. All through his ministry he is excited. He's angry, he's overjoyed, and he likes to preach long sermons. Speaking of falling asleep, in Acts 20:9, Paul preached all night in an upstairs room. A young man named Eutychus who was sitting in a window fell asleep and fell from the window three stories down. He was pronounced dead, but Paul was able to revive him, after which Paul went on preaching until dawn.

But being passionate is contagious. When I first went to work at the Marble Collegiate Church in New York, I worked with Reverend Florence Pert. I was excited talking to her about an idea and she said, "I can see we're going to have to break you in." I couldn't hide the look on my face. She asked what I was thinking and I said, "I hope you don't 'break' me in."

Paul was passionate about the Gospel and look at all he achieved!

The second thing to notice is that Paul got busy. He didn't hoard that grace. Although good works don't earn us grace, they certainly are the very best way to express our gratitude to God for grace. We often have the idea that only tremendous actions count, but in God's eyes every small kindness counts.

Fred Craddock, who died not long ago, is my favorite theologian. In his book of stories he talks about how when he was a boy and listened to sermons, the heroes were Albert Schweitzer, Mother Teresa, and missionaries living in terrible circumstances. He thought, "It's a shame you can't be a Christian in this little town. Nobody is chasing or imprisoning or killing Christians." But when he went to summer camp and he heard all kinds of inspiring stories, he committed his life to Christ.

He had visions of saving babies and drowning men. He writes, "I was sincere then, as I have been these forty-five years since. 'I give my life,' but nobody warned me that I could not write one big check. I've had to write forty-five years of little checks: 87 cents, 21 cents, a dollar three cents. Just nibbled away at this giving of life. [Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, (Chalice Press: St. Louis, 2001), p. 155]

I found that quote while I was looking for a story I remembered about grace, because grace is what this sermon is all about. Here's Fred Craddock's story:

I was in a distant city, and the seminar in which I was involved ended on Saturday at lunch. Our host had insisted if we could possibly stay over on Sunday, it would help our budget because the airlines give a big break if you stay over Saturday night. I could and did, but the little motel where I was housed did not seem to be in a church district. I asked at the counter on Sunday morning, "Is there a church near to which I could walk?"

After a little huddle behind the counter they said, "Well, there's one about three or four blocks down this way," pointing in one direction.

I said, "Do you know what kind it is?"

They said, "No, we don't know."

I said, "That's okay." So I walked and I went in. It was a small building, modestly built, one of those that looks like the men of the church helped build it, because they seemed to love it very much. It was warm and friendly, not elaborate at all for worship. I took my seat, a bit early, but it soon began to fill up and soon was totally filled. I would say there were about 120 people. At the appointed hour, the choir came down. Following the choir came the minister, in this case, a man.

I was absolutely shocked. He was very tall – I forgave him for that. I suppose he was 6'4". He was also very large, maybe 280 or 300 pounds. But the most noticeable feature was his stumbling, lumbering gait. He was awkward, almost falling, with his long useless arms at his sides like they were awaiting further instruction. His head was misshapen, his hair was askew. He stumbled up the three or four steps to get to the pulpit. When he turned to face us, I saw the thick glasses, and through them I could see the milky film over his eyes, one of his eyes going out, nothing coming in to the other. When he read he held the book near his nose. When he spoke, the sinews of his neck worked with such vigor as he pushed out the words, it was as if he had learned to speak as an adult. But I lost all consciousness of that after a while. He read I Corinthians 13 and spoke of the subject in the bulletin, "But the greatest of these is love." It was an unusual thing. If you had a copy of his sermon, you would say, I'd give it a grade of "C." It was not poetic, it was not prophetic, it was pastoral. It was so warm and so full of love and affection. It was firm and it had exhortation in it. But the relationship between those people, the love that he extended as he preached, and the love that came back from those people who sat quietly, leaning forward was captivating, and I was captured. What is this? How could this grotesque creature be so full of love? I didn't understand. I started remembering things that I shouldn't have remembered – all those stories about how people who have grotesque features sometimes are granted a special quality of affection, *Beauty and the Beast* or Victor Hugo's *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, so ugly and yet so beautiful in his love and capacity for affection...

I wanted to get acquainted with this extraordinary preacher, so I lingered at the door hoping to invite him to lunch. He couldn't go, but as I stood at the door and observed the greetings and hellos and little words of pastoral care, comfort, and respect between him and the members, one woman I would guess to be seventy shook his hand at the door. She

spoke with him and said this: "I wish I could know your mother." I saw her having the same trouble as I was. She didn't understand the source of this and thought maybe, I wish I knew your mother. He said, "My mother's name is Grace."

When everybody had left and I began to visit with him, we sat on the back pew for a few minutes, and I said, "That was an unusual response you gave that woman, 'My mother's name is Grace.'"

And he said, "It is? When I was born," he said, "I was put up for adoption at the Department of Family Services. But as you can see, nobody wanted to adopt me. So I went from foster home to foster home, and when I was about sixteen or seventeen, I saw some young people going into a church. I wanted to be with young people, so I went in, and there I met grace—the grace of God."

He met grace and found a life worth living. I pray we meet grace and find lives worth living. Amen.