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Church of the Redeemer-Chestnut Hill
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Pentecost V

Faith is the handmaid of Love

This morning we will commence part II of the Galatians mini series that we began last week. But before launching into the final installment, lets take a few moments to review what we have covered so far.

Last week on Galatians:

We learned that Paul was writing to the Galatians, a church that he had planted in what is now northern Turkey, because the Galatians had stopped trusting in the power of Jesus, specifically his power over sin and death, dealt with on the cross; and had turned instead to alternative ways to patch up their relationship with God and make themselves holy. The problem with that, says Paul, is that there are no alternative ways to patch up our relationship with God, much less to become holy. Jesus is the only way.

When we turn to other ways to make ourselves holy, to justify ourselves in our own eyes, we usually look to things we can control. In the case of the Galatians they turned to the Mosaic law, specifically acts of ritual purity such as circumcision and dietary laws. But Paul tells them that these practices do not actually change the heart. They are as ineffective in dealing with selfishness and arrogance and jealousy as Lady Macbeths' hand washing was in dealing with her guilt.

No says Paul, being right with God, being forgiven is a gift that we receive by faith in what Jesus did for us, specifically that scandalous death on the cross. Nothing *we* do ever pays our debt to God. It is not as if there were a great ledger of our good deeds in one column set against our deficiencies in another and God did some accounting and we came out even, or in the black. That has only been done once by Jesus. His credit is applied to our debt.

It all comes down to faith, says Paul. Faith not in ourselves, or our good works, but in God's love displayed in what God has done for us, and what he will continue to do for us through Jesus.

Last week's sermon could be summed up in one sentence spoken by the Rev John Harper as he and the Titanic were being pulled into the icy waters of the Atlantic: "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved!"

But while faith is certainly the beginning of the Christian life, and the sustaining response in the Christian life, it is not the end, and by that I mean the ultimate point of the Christian life.

John Wesley says it this way: "Faith still is only the handmaid of love"

As glorious and honorable as it is, it is not the end of the commandment. God has given this honor to love alone. Love is the end of all the commandments of God. Love is the end, the sole end, of every dispensation of God from the beginning of the world to the consummation of all things. And it will endure when heaven and earth flee away, for love alone never faileth. (1 Cor 13:8) Faith will totally fail, it will be swallowed up in sight in the everlasting vision of God.¹ Faith is only the handmaid of love...

So while we must have faith, that is not the end of the story. Faith gives birth to love. As Cranmer says, "a True faith cannot be kept secret, but when occasion is offered, it will break out and show itself by good works."

This is because when we receive Christ as our Lord and savior, he sends his Holy Spirit to live in us. We no longer have a book of rules to follow (in the form of the law), we have a living spirit indwelling us. And the Holy Spirit produces fruit. Love, joy, peace,

¹ .¹ (John Wesley, ed John C. Outler, from the law established by faith; discourse II, Oxford Univ Press, 1964, p226-7)

patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. These are the natural produce of the Spirit. Just as it is not altogether a surprise for me to have seen this morning that my red delicious apple tree is filled with tiny green soon to be red delicious apples, it is not surprising that a person who has received God's love in Jesus, will begin to show love.

But what about people who say they are Christians and do not show love? What is going on there? What about the smart alec who said, I love to sin and God loves to forgive, what a wonderful arrangement? Or, as I was hearing about from my dinner partner on Friday night, the people who flip you off in traffic on their way to church? My dinner partner on Friday night was not a big church goer. Paul says that having faith in Christ sets us free. Having faith in Christ is like being a prisoner whose cell door is opened wide. The prisoner is free, but she can use her freedom to go out and commit more crimes or w she use her freedom for good. The Holy Spirit never compels us, only guides us. God never desires to take away our free will, even when we give our hearts to him. Over time, God woos us, teaches us, rebukes us, encourages us, loves us into being lovely.

So to review, faith in the love of God made known in Jesus, specifically that he would die for us is primary for Paul. There is no other way to patch up our relationship with God except the Jesus way. But why we wonder? Why does faith have to be the key? If love is the ultimate goal, why can't we all just try harder to be more loving? Why can't we just skip the Jesus part? Why can't we all just figure out the proper centering yoga practice, and say the right affirmations and do some nice charity work and say: here you go God, this is the best I can do, hope this works for you?

Why did God make it that we have to have faith in order to receive forgiveness? I turn again to John Wesley. After first cautioning against the presumption of asking God to explain his conduct, Wesley says that pride has always been our greatest enemy. Pride tempted Adam and Eve to question God's word and to eat the apple. Pride makes us think we can be our own gods. Faith counteracts pride. Faith is the tiny low door that humbles

us to the dust. Faith brings us before God as mere sinners inwardly and outwardly... Faith looks at God from the humble place of need. And from that place and that place only, can we see the staggering love and mercy of God.....who would himself stoop lower than the dust on our behalf. Faith is simply a recognition of the grace of God—his uncanny desire to love us no matter what.

Faith in Christ will produce love over time. And these acts of love are deeply pleasing to God. But it is not these works of love that we do that make us right with God. It is what Jesus did for us. That ends up being a great consolation. Because the funny thing is that the more we progress in our Christian walk, the more aware we become of how far we fall short. It is the great saints who use the humble language of Wesley to describe their rampant selfishness, their lack of love, their unwillingness to do what God asks. That realization would become utterly crippling if it were not for the assurance that they have in God's good work already completed.

There was a debate between two preachers over the faith works paradox. They were arguing over what was the key to salvation.

Finally one fellow says

You know, if I didn't believe that good works were essential to my salvation, I wouldn't bother to get out of bed in the morning. The other guy responded, Well if I wasn't assured, completely that it is by grace I have been saved, I couldn't get out of bed in the morning!

Faith /Works:are related not at odds with one another.

Yesterday we had a funeral here at Church of the Redeemer for a colleague of mine, a young man in his twenties who started seminary at Gordon Conwell while I was there. I did not get to know him because shortly after beginning, he had to withdraw because he was diagnosed with cancer. I learned many things about him yesterday. He was a talented athlete and was the captain of the swim team at Williams College. After he graduated, he worked on Wall Street. But soon he became deeply involved in his life

of faith and felt that he was called to ministry, particularly preaching. But soon all his dreams were set aside as he began a battle with a very painful disease. His brother shared with us about his witness to faith throughout his illness. On the day that he died they were together in the hospital room. Geoff could no longer speak because he had had a procedure done on his throat the day before. A few hours before he died he wrote two messages. One was “Jesus Christ is King.” That is faith.

And then the last thing he wrote was “Love.”