

6.1.25 Sermon Transcript – Galatians 3:1-9, 23-29

65 years ago, in 1960, six-year-old Ruby Bridges was escorted to school by federal marshals. She was the first black student to go to a newly desegregated white elementary school in New Orleans. And as she approached the school with those federal marshals escorting her, there were tons of people from the community there – adults who were hurling racial slurs at her. Adults who were doing things like holding up a small black baby doll with a tiny coffin as she was going to school. Once she got into the school, that first day, she and her mother spent the entire day in the principal's office because there was just so much commotion and nothing could happen. There were families who were boycotting the school, refusing to send their students into that school. Most of the teachers refused to teach her. There was one teacher by the name of Ms. Henry who would teach Ruby, and Ruby was her only student for, I believe, a whole year. She was the only one who would teach her. And Ruby she grew up (and she's still living), and she tells her story – but she became one who sought to embody the breaking down of barriers. One of the things that I find incredibly powerful about the story of Ruby is that as she was walking by the protesters who were hurling insults at her, she was still praying for them as a six-year-old child, “God forgive them. They’re saying things but they don't know what they're doing.” She echoes the words of Jesus, “Father forgive them, they do not know what they are doing.” I hear this story of Ruby Bridges and the work that this six-year-old girl, the courage of this six-year-old girl in a newly desegregating world, (which of course we know was still incredibly segregated, if not legally, certainly in mentality and certainly in attempted practice), and I see that she was one, who at the age of six, worked to tear down those dividing walls, those barriers, those fences put around “us” and “them.”

Today, we come to this passage where Paul is continuing the same conversation that we heard last week. And so even though Terry started out reading last week's passage, it's totally relevant to today because we just continue the story. We have Paul's letter to this Galatian church, and Galatia was a region in what is now Turkey. Paul had gone there, and he'd started these Christian communities. Now he's gone away, but he's writing letters of encouragement, letters of support, or in this particular instance, a letter challenging the Galatians. I mean, you heard how it started: “You foolish Galatians!” I mean, he's in essence calling them by their full name. You know how when you're in trouble and your parent calls you by your full name, like, “Cynthia Louise Briggs, you're in trouble!” Paul is calling the Galatians by their full name. “You foolish Galatians, you have gone astray!”

And what have they done exactly? Well, we heard a little bit of this issue last week when we heard about Paul's own conversion and he became a very zealous servant of God and of the gospel, and he had a conflict with Peter. And if you recall, that conflict was over eating with the Gentiles. Peter had had a previous experience where God showed him that as a Jewish follower of Jesus, it was in fact good for him to sit down at the table with Gentiles, which, prior to experience that we hear about in Acts chapter 10, Jews and Gentiles, even if they were both followers of Jesus, did not sit down at the table together. They were separate. They were to be segregated. But now, Peter has had that conversion experience,

but he's felt social pressure to conform to the old ways. Paul, in last week's passage that we read, is arguing that Peter was wrong. Peter needs to get his act together. Peter needs to be called to accountability. He has been convicted by the Holy Spirit and he needs to live like it and act like it.

The same kind of issue continues in this week's passage because it's a continuation of the same letter. See, it's not just Peter who has been having this problem. It's the church in the region of Galatia at large. After Paul left, there had been other folks who stepped into that leadership position. And these are folks who are Jewish Christians, followers of the way of Jesus. And we've heard about this sort of factionalism that existed within the early church. There were those who thought you had to follow the law, namely, that you had to be circumcised and you had to follow all the dietary restrictions in order to be considered a true Christian. You had to observe the law. You had to do the right things in order to be considered a follower of Jesus. So that's one faction. And then there is the other faction, saying, "No, no, no. It's grace, God's grace. We don't have to do those things because we know the Holy Spirit has come even upon the Gentiles." And that's the side that Paul is on. That's the argument that Paul makes. In this letter, he's confronting those who are a part of that first faction in the Galatian church, the ones who say, "You've got to be circumcised. You got to follow the dietary restrictions. You have to practice the law in order to be considered faithful and in order to be a part of this community. Otherwise, there's a fence around it. We're in and you're out." This is what Paul is countering. This is what Paul is calling out when he says, "You foolish Galatians!" calling them by their full name. He's saying, "You have forgotten that God has opened up his covenant and his community to all people. And it is based on unity in Christ alone. It's not based on whether or not you follow the law. It's based upon the grace of Christ." Now, this isn't to say that Paul says there's no markers of what it means to be the community of faith, but they are not based around legalism. They're based around the fruit of the Spirit, the kind of behaviors and attitudes that we demonstrate (but we'll get to that more next week when we focus on Pentecost). But Paul is making this argument, and he's calling out the Galatian church reminding them, "This is not how it is!"

We get to the really good stuff at the end of the passage where he says, "In Christ there is no Greek no Jew, there is no male nor female, there is no slave nor free. All are one in Christ Jesus." Here he is breaking down those walls, breaking down those barriers, breaking down those fences. I kind of feel like I'm becoming a broken record with this message. Every week, I feel like I'm saying the same thing, and maybe you think so too. Well, the truth is, I am. Why? Because this is such an integral part of the gospel. It's because we hear it in scripture over and over and over and over again, in so many different ways, that ultimately God's kingdom is one that breaks down those barriers, those categories, those walls. And this is what Paul is telling the Galatian church.

It's a message that I think also echoes true for us today. We come with the same questions as the early Christians. Who matters? Who belongs? Who gets a seat at the table? Well, the answer is simple. Anyone who wants a seat at the table has a seat at the table. It does not

matter. But so often, we see people coming to the table and putting up reserved signs. These seats are only for so-and-so. So picture with me a big banquet table and it's laid out and an invitation has gone out to everyone, but some people arrive a little bit early to stake out their seats. And so one group comes to the table and decides, "You know what, I don't like the decorations in the middle of this table, so I'm actually going to move the bread and the cup and instead I'm going to stick a big old flag of my country right there. And that's going to be the centerpiece of the table. And only those who like having that flag there can sit at this table." And then another group shows up and they have all of their jackets with them, and their bags, and they come and they sit down at the table and they start draping jackets over chairs and say, "We're saving these and only people who come from traditional families can sit at this table. If you don't fit into that, then there's not a space for you here." And then another group comes and they think back to the "good ol' days," the days before Ruby Bridges walked into her elementary school with the federal marshals. They start to stake out a section and we see that big old sign indicating, "The whites only" portion of the table. And then we see more and more groups of people coming in, trying to stake out a claim and saying, "Only people like me, who think like me, or who want the same things as me belong at this table." We see this so prevalently in our society today. There are so many people who are putting fences around the banquet table meant for all, and they're doing it in the name of Jesus Christ saying, "These are the people whom Jesus favors!"

Paul reminds us in today's passage that that is foolishness. There are stronger words that I could use for that, but I will not. Paul calls it foolishness when he says to the Galatians, "You are putting fences around God's kingdom and God's table! Do you not know that in Christ there is no longer Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free? None of those things matter anymore. Those are gone, eradicated. So you foolish Galatians, start living like that. You don't need to adhere to the legalism." Legalism was the fence in that day. We have different fences that get put up today. Sometimes legalism might be one of them, but for Paul that was the tool being used to exclude people from God's kingdom and from God's table.

So what does this passage have to say to us today? We do live in a different time and in a different place and the specific circumstances might be different, but the sin the sin is still the same. If we're to be faithful followers of Jesus, if we're to believe and to live out that idea that in Christ there is no Jew nor Greek male nor female slave nor free, then we need to think about how we are called to act. I think the first thing we have to do is that we have to name it and call it out when we see somebody putting up a fence around Christ's table in the name of Jesus Christ. That is our responsibility as people of faith. Just as Paul called out Peter and then in today's passage, he calls out the Galatian church saying, "You've forgotten the heart of the gospel." We too have a responsibility to do that. We have a responsibility to use our voices. However, in order to do any of that, we have to look to the ways of Jesus and to center ourselves on his words, on his practices. Our calling doesn't come from the idea that we think we're morally superior or we get it and they don't. If we get into that mentality, then we start to perpetuate the same problems. Instead, we are to center ourselves on Christ and call attention back to the gospel and to the work of Jesus,

and to the words of Paul here that the barriers, the dividing lines are being torn down. That's where we have a responsibility to speak out.

But we also have a responsibility ourselves to repent. Paul called Peter to repentance and Peter does in fact realize that he has succumbed to social pressure, that he has forgotten what the Holy Spirit has done in his life and has shown him, and he repents. He recognizes that which is wrong within his own heart and in his own practice, and he changes course. Each and every single one of us here has something to repent of, something within our hearts or something in the way that we live or practice. None of us have "arrived." We're all called to repent.

We're called to advocate as well. For those who are on the outside of the fences, put up by people who are straying from the ways of Jesus, we're called to advocate and to help tear down those fences so all have access to the table of grace. We're also called to build beloved community. As the church, we are called to be a community of the faithful. When we talk about the kingdom of God, it's not just pie in the sky, by and by, something far in the distance that we don't worry about here. No, that's not what Paul is talking about. That's not what Jesus talked about. They're talking about the reality here and now. For Paul, the church is meant to be an alternative community that doesn't play by the same rules as the rest of the world. The church is called to be the one place where those fences do not exist. The church is called to be that beloved community where those who are looked down upon by the world, scorned, pushed aside, are brought to the center and given seats of honor at Christ's table. It's a place where we're called to care for one another, to be present to one another, to be motivated not by furthering ourselves but by walking alongside one another in our joys, in our hurts, in our hopes and in our challenges to be a beloved community.

A few weeks ago, Reverend William Barber and some other clergy were arrested in the Capitol Rotunda, and some of you might have heard of William Barber. He's a well-known pastor. I would also call him a social activist because of the work that he does. I would call him a public theologian. Back in 2013, in North Carolina, he started something called the Moral Monday Movement, where he and other people of faith started showing up at their state legislature because there were all kinds of things that were going through their state legislature that were harming people – vulnerable people. It was impacting health care, food, education. It was a rough time for more vulnerable people in North Carolina in 2013. So Rev. Barber felt that he and other people of faith needed to show up and to use their voices to help break down the fences that were preventing access to a life of flourishing for many people. Out of that movement grew a national movement that gathers now every Monday at the nation's capital. And I share this only to say that William Barber continually points to the teachings of Jesus, and he regularly refers to this passage in Galatians that we heard this morning where Paul says, "In Christ, we don't have any of these distinctions anymore. We don't use these categories to define people or their worth anymore."

Now Paul's not saying everybody's exactly the same and we're all just supposed to assimilate into one sort of "whatever." No, what Paul is saying is that these categories don't have any bearing on your value, of your worth, of your place in God's kingdom. None of these categories impact that anymore. William Barber tells the story of one particular time when he ended up being arrested, and it was with a rabbi, an undocumented immigrant woman, a black Muslim activist, a white Baptist preacher, and he said, "this is the true moral fusion of God's people, not a narrow white national religion, but the beloved community where all are one." I respect Rev. Barber in so many ways because he constantly holds this vision up that Paul holds up for us in this text this morning, the same one he held up for the Galatian church 2,000 years ago.

Our circumstances, our particular context is different from the context in which Paul originally wrote. But the truth? The truth remains. How will we as people of faith live into that reality? "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free." How do we as a people live with the courage of Ruby Bridges as she walked into that school as a six-year-old escorted by federal marshals, all the while adults hurling racial slurs and insults at her? How do we live with the moral courage of people like William Barber and others?

The table is the starting point. Why do we have communion every week in worship? It's because this is the starting place for all of our ethics, all of our morality, all of our Christian living. At this table, we hear over and over and over again that Christ has a place for us, that this table is open to all, that Christ meets us here in the giving of his very self. He strengthens us and nourishes us. Every week when we pray, we hear those words that Jesus spoke to his disciples, and we ask the Holy Spirit to be poured on us gathered here and on these gifts in front of us so that they can be the body and blood of Christ so that we can be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood. Every week, this is the starting place for all of our lives, individually and collectively. The kingdom of God is like a great banquet table, Jesus tells us, and when the folks who've been invited, the wealthy, the powerful, the up-and-ups don't show up, the host says, "Go out into the streets and bring in the vulnerable. Bring in the forgotten. Give them the seats of honor." Jesus puts no fences around his table. Neither should we. So today my prayer is that Paul's words would speak to us and that this table would nourish us so that we might have the moral courage to faithfully follow Jesus Christ in a world that's constantly trying to put categories around people; one that's constantly trying to build walls to isolate, to separate, and to condemn. May we be the beloved community that Jesus calls us to be. Amen.