

## ***Custodian -vs- Disciplinarian***

### **Psalm 42; Galatians 3:23-29**

In an effort to teach my daughter responsibility, I required her, when she arrived at her friend's house, to call home to let me know that she had arrived safely. The first few times she phoned, but as she got more confident in her ability to go back and forth safely, she forgot to call. The first time she forgot, I called to make sure she had arrived safely. Afterward, I told her that if she forgot to call again, her punishment would be to come home and forego playing with her friend. A few days later, when the phone lay silent once again, I knew that if she were going to learn she would have to be punished. But I didn't want to punish her! I went to the telephone and began to dial the number, regretting that she would have to cut her visit short because of her lack of contact with me. As I dialed, I prayed for wisdom. "Treat her like I treat you," God seemed to say. With that, as the telephone rang one time, I hung up. A few seconds later the phone rang, and it was my daughter. "I'm here, mom!"

"What took you so long to call?" I asked.

"We started playing and I forgot. But mom, I heard the phone ring once, and I remembered."

"I'm glad you remembered," I said. "Have fun."

There are many Christians who view God as one who waits to punish us when we step out of line. That's God, the disciplinarian. I wonder how often he rings just once, hoping we will phone home.

The title of this sermon comes from the variation in words used in the interpretation of Holy Scriptures. One translation uses the word disciplinarian, while another uses the word custodian in the same place. Is there a difference? I think so.

According to the definition offered by Merriam Webster, disciplinarian is: *a person who is very strict about punishing bad behavior : a person who uses discipline as a way of making sure that rules or orders are obeyed.*

Custodian, on the other hand, is defined as, someone who keeps and protects something valuable for another person. Or, a person who cleans and takes care of a building.

There is quite a difference in the meanings of these two words used to define a certain term in scripture. How do you see God? Is God primarily the one who punishes you when you get out of line? OR! Is God the one who keeps and protects something valuable?

In the Letter to the Church of Galatia, Paul is writing about a particular situation that faces the church in that particular time. Power struggles, exclusionary tactics, ecclesial face-offs, accusations of caving in to public opinion, and hypocrisy. The text from Paul's Letter to the church in Galatia reflects just such a conflict, between two giants of the early church: Paul and Peter! Apparently Paul is not the only one suffering from people pleasure syndrome. Paul declares that Peter has succumbed to pressures of the society and cores amen the heart of the gospel message.

Does that sound familiar? In the church of today, fundamentalists accuse more liberal theologians of giving in to the pressures of society in many theological issues. Many of us know what it is like to run counter to the powers-that-be, only to feel the pressure to "rein it in." Each week I confess to some feelings of concern as I contemplate scripture and experience tension between what the Spirit is leading me to say and what I think the congregation wants to hear. In fact, among colleagues there is a cautionary quote, "that will preach" that is a stamp of approval and often means the topic is a safe one.

In this letter Paul claims that Peter lacks the courage of his convictions. Peter and Paul confront each other in Antioch, a melting pot of people, cultures and faith. Paul was a multiculturalist far ahead of his time. Paul saw Jesus as the fulfillment of God's love and God's inclusion, making Gentiles full members of the family.

Many times in this letter Paul declares that a person is justified not by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. According to Paul, justification is what a computer's word processor does with the margins of a document - straightening up the words so they are in right relationship to the page. This what God does for sinners - those of us who are out of line. Messy human lives get straightened out, not by their own doing, but because of God's actions through Jesus Christ. The grace of Jesus makes it happen for ALL.

As I studied and prepared for this message, every newscast was filled with emotionally charged coverage of the mass shooting in Orlando, Florida last weekend. As I studied and meditated upon this message from Paul to the Galatians, I wondered what Paul would say to Twenty-first Century Christians. How would Paul respond to the broken world in which we live today?

Of one thing I was sure, Paul would address the issues of today head-on, not mincing words. Paul would not concern himself with what his listeners want to hear, but would focus on the problems and how God, through Jesus Christ, views the issues of today.

Paul contends that ALL are justified by grace through Jesus Christ. Jews are justified by grace. Gentiles are justified by grace. Christ alone has done what obedience to the law in general and circumcision in particular could never do. Jesus Christ has straightened out human beings with God and with one another, resulting in a new community; resulting in solidarity; resulting in unity.

A minister friend of mine shared with me her experience as her denomination was having yet another debate over sexuality. She grew weary of the debate and finally stood to address the body, "Enough, I am sick of this. Let's all get on with feeding the poor and taking the good news to the world." At that challenge, one of her wise friends said, "This is a struggle for the soul of the church. Go home and read Galatians." She did. And she conceded that her colleague was right. Galatians 3:28 is the high point of Paul's letter.

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

It is difficult for us to wrap our heads around this inclusivity of which Paul speaks. Can we comprehend that in the midst of complex immigration controversies, "There is neither native born nor illegal immigrant?"

In a society dramatically divided by income, "There is neither moneyed nor working class, nor poor." In a society polarized by race, "There are either people of color or people of no color." In this season of elections, "There is neither Republican, nor Democrat, nor independent." In this society where sexual orientation divides and destroys, "There is neither gay nor straight; homosexual nor heterosexual."

Paul says that Christ alone matters: Christ our unity, Christ our focus, Christ the line of energy along which relationships run, Christ the beginning and the end, Christ the cause for which we live, Christ from which nothing can take us, not even death - especially not death.

In the words of Paul, as presented in the Message, "Until the time we were mature enough to respond freely in faith to the living God, we were carefully surrounded and protected by the Mosaic Law. The law was like those Greek tutors, with which you are familiar, who, escort children to school and protect them from danger or distraction, making sure the children will really get to the place they set out for. But now you have arrived at your destination: By faith in Christ you are in direct relationship with God. Your baptism in Christ was not just washing you up for a fresh start. It also involved dressing you in an adult faith wardrobe - Christ's life, the fulfillment of God's original promise. In Christ's family, there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave or free, male or female. Among us you are all equal. That is, we are all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ. Also, since you are Christ's family, then you are Abraham's descendant, heirs according to the covenant promises."