

**Grace in Galatia**  
**The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC**  
**Rev. Jennifer Gingras**  
**May 21, 2017**

*Galatians 1:13-17, 2:11-21*

We received Paul's letter a few days ago. I don't know quite what to think. Our friend definitively sounds frustrated with us!

I remember the days when Paul first came to visit. We were so caught up living our own lives. It's not easy to get ahead in a province like Galatia! My family works at the market here in Lyssa, we have a booth to sell spices. Our children are trained to call out the prices and what we have available to sell. My job is to smile and greet the customers, try to talk them into buying more than they came for. And my husband, well let's just say, he knows how to work the scale in our family's favor.

So there we were, right smack in the middle of our busiest sales day, when I heard this voice speaking about a new teacher, just a few feet away. It was Paul. He was in his own makeshift booth, stitching together fabric for a tent. As he worked, he told his story to the customer.

It was the same story he hinted at in his letter... how he used to be a Pharisee and committed all types of violence against this group of people who followed this man Jesus who they believed to be the Messiah. But then he had this otherworldly experience one day on the Road to Damascus and met Jesus, which was pretty amazing since he had been crucified and died many so days before. It was compelling enough a story for me to lean out of our booth to listen.

That's when I overheard Paul telling his customer how this encounter turned him around and changed him forever. And now he dedicates his life to spreading Jesus' message of unconditional, radical, boundary breaking love.

Later that afternoon, a few of us invited Paul back to tell us more. He gathered us together in the center of town after the market was closed. He convinced us that following the example of Jesus – his ways of loving God, our neighbor, ourselves, was a better way to live than what we had been doing.

Paul had a past, a violent one. We heard all about how zealous he could be. He told us again how that one fateful day on the road to Damascus changed his life forever.

And then he told us that if we too could learn to trust in Jesus, our lives would change. We listened, and learned that devoting ourselves to living the kind of life Jesus did meant we were already right with God! We could be forgiven for the mistakes of our past (which, for some of us, was a pretty long list). We too were promised a place in God's family as a beloved child! Because of this love, our very lives would be forever transformed.

Then he looked right at my family and told us that cheating our customers was wrong, but that it's not too late to make it right. How did he even know? Imagine, a God that doesn't measure out grace like it's a precious spice sold to the highest bidder. Forgiveness is possible. Love changes everything.

Pretty hard to believe, isn't it?

And it was hard to accept, too, at first. We didn't understand grace. We couldn't fathom how a God we didn't know and couldn't see would want to give us a gift we clearly didn't deserve and couldn't earn. None of us could live up to what Jesus did and none of us deserved the grace that comes with following him. It's just all so different than what we've grown up with.

We were used to going to the Temple of Artemis to make sacrifices and participate in rituals. For us, it was about a half day's journey to Ephesus. You've heard of Artemis, haven't you? She's the fertility Goddess, the Huntress. The Romans call her Diana. Devotees like us come from all over the world to celebrate her. There are huge processions honoring her feast days with music, dancing, singing, dramatic presentations with priests and priestesses chanting their allegiance. I'm sure that Artemis makes a lot of money for the city, too. In fact, the largest bank in all the world right now is housed in her temple!

From the time when we were young children we were told if we didn't worship her the way she liked she would use her mighty power to take away all the things dearest to us. Whenever something bad happened, our first thought was "I wonder what that person did to anger Artemis?" None of us wanted to be on her bad side. Who knew what might happen!

That goes for all the other gods and goddesses too. It was so complicated keeping track of all the festivals and holy days and obligations. All to avoid being destroyed. To be honest, we lived in fear.

Then along comes this Paul to tell us about a God that is the exact opposite of the one we think we know. A God we couldn't see, or touch. One that didn't have a temple we could visit or statue we could worship.

We were excited and intrigued by what Paul had to say. A few of us organized a group that got together regularly to talk about his words and pray. We'd gather at someone's house and eat a meal together, sharing what we could. My family was happy to contribute the spices: rich zaatar, bitter herbs, precious salt all the way from the Dead Sea. Others brought roasted lamb, fresh pressed olive oil, bread or wine.

Men, women, children – all levels of privilege and wealth sitting at the same table, gathering as equals. Can you imagine? The first time we ate together, it was terribly awkward. Who got the first pass of the hot dish? Who would say the blessing over the food? In time, we got used to it. Paul taught us that eating together was a reminder of God's grace, and it wasn't so important to do it the right way as it was to eat with the people God loves – which it turns out, looking around our table, is pretty much everybody.

And we took up a collection to help those who were struggling: the widowed, the orphaned, the disabled and diseased who begged on the streets. The funny thing is, I knew the poor had always been there. My family and I were accustomed to walking past them quickly on our way to the market. But something about living as a follower of Jesus kept me from looking away now. I felt compelled to contribute, to help. Maybe it was all the love.

Sounds pretty ideal, doesn't it? Well, it was, as long as life was good and bad things didn't happen. But eventually, they did. People in the community had the same challenges they always had before they followed Jesus: loved ones still got sick, a neighbor's house burnt down, our good friend was unfairly arrested right in front of our booth as a threat against the Pax Romana.

And Paul, by then, had moved on to Syria with his missionary friends Prisca and Aquilla. He wasn't around to counsel us, to tell us what we were doing wrong that would cause so much sadness and pain.

I guess that's why we started listening to those traveling teachers from Jerusalem who stayed with us that one time. They too were followers of Jesus, but they told us that Paul's teachings were incomplete. The only way we could be right with God was to give ourselves to the laws of Moses first. For some of us, that meant the next step was a painful surgery. Until then, we had to stop this custom of eating together until all were clean under the law. And forget about having women at the table, they should eat at a separate location in the kitchen, away from the men.

Before you judge us, you have to understand that when Paul moved on, we all felt a little bit like a newborn colt standing on shifting sand. Wobbly.

It seemed like a good idea at the time, after all, Paul told us that Jesus himself was an observant Jew. We were desperate, and this was something tangible that we could do.

It makes sense why sounds so upset with us in this letter. He heard the news. We were trying to fix it, which meant that with our actions we were trying to regulate God's grace. None of us, being Greek and Roman, knew how to follow all those laws. In learning and adopting them, our focus and energies were being exhausted. Why did we take something so simple, and make it so complicated? I don't have an answer. Do you?

We were even more shocked in that section of his letter where Paul calls Peter out. Right in front of everyone! I've never met the man, but I've heard that Peter-Cephas-The Rock isn't someone you go up against. Paul did just that. Peter was acting like us, not honoring the good news of Jesus. Sure, it was OK for him to eat with us when he arrived in town, but as soon as James and the other leaders showed up, he was too good for us. Or we were too unclean for him. I guess if a man like Peter can make a mistake, we can too.

This much is clear to me now: we're not made right by things we do but by what God does in us. We can't be made right by even our own piousness or faithfulness or the hours we spend in prayer – even though those things can be lifegiving. God's love is a gift – given freely. I may never understand how God could be full of that sort of Grace but I'll take it! Amen.