

The World Needs Grown Ups
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Galatians 3:1-9, 23-29

Growing up isn't easy! Spend some time with a puppy... go on, I dare you! Sure, they can be adorable as can be. But they require constant supervision, encouragement, and correction or they will tear your house up.

Of course, it's the same with small humans. When they were younger, I've had to correct my kids many times, saying things like "Ooo, don't stick that fork into the electrical socket!" and "be sure you chew your food better next time!"

Ideally, with lots of patience, nurturing and correction, children (and maybe even some puppies) develop a value system and a sense of right and wrong. Of course, most can only get there with a great deal of support from family members, teachers and other elders and mentors.

In our passage from Galatians Paul employs the metaphor of "*growing up*" to describe new life in Christ. I like how the Message paraphrased this thought in verses 23-26...

Until the time when 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.

Every generation of the faithful ask, "What is required of us?" In Galatians, we have Paul's breathtaking assurance of God's amazing grace that expects much, but actually **requires** rather little in return for human salvation.

I realize that the words "saved" and "salvation" have become loaded religious words. Among the more useful meanings we could consider are achieving healing, wholeness and integrity. Paul understood salvation as being made "*right with God*," something that he believed God has accomplished in Jesus Christ.

Paul addresses this letter "*to the churches of Galatia*." Who were these churches? Galatia cuts a swath through the center of Asia Minor (in modern day Turkey), and Paul had traveled there and founded several of them. He worries that the work he had done in these congregations is at risk, because of the challenge made by these Jewish Christian Missionaries – the ones we heard about last week in our reading from the book of Acts.

Of course, like many other ancient texts, we only have one side of the argument (Paul's.) But we can determine from his response what his adversaries must have stood for. Like Paul, they believed that Jesus was the Jewish messiah and that God had raised him from the dead. So far, so good. But unlike Paul, they believed the most logical move in responding to Jesus was to continue keeping the Laws of Israel.

A common term among some theologians for this faction has been "*The Judaizers*". This has fallen out of fashion for a number of good reasons. In our post-Holocaust world, we must be very careful not to employ ancient arguments as a reason for current anti-Semitism. Remember, this is not a Jew versus Christian debate, but a conflict WITHIN the earliest followers of Jesus.

Let's just call them "the Missionaries." The Missionaries wanted Gentile converts to also keep the Law, to "hedge their bets" so to speak. Paul sees this a betrayal of the Gospel. In his mind, Christ has either freed them from the old ways... or he hasn't.

It is not surprising that the Missionaries wanted to hold on to their old practices, keeping the Law was their primary means of identity. It was a sign of all the promises of God given to their ancestors, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

But now, Paul is saying that keeping the Law is no longer necessary. But if it is not necessary were the promises of the ancestors valid, or was the Law a lie? Was it ever necessary?

That is an important question, and Paul has a really thoughtful answer. He uses a metaphor... the Greek word translated here in our text as "disciplinarian" is paidagōgos. This is the name given to a tutor, often an educated slave, who helped a child to grow up by teaching them to read and write, and all the dos and don'ts of society.

In our day, we might substitute nanny or au pair, but Paul's point is that the Law was a temporary solution that serves to prepare someone for adulthood. In this way, the law was a boundary, a fence. He says that before our faith in Jesus we were protected by the Law until we were ready, until we "grew up" sufficiently to be free on our own.

The problem (as Paul saw it), was that the Law was good about showing people their sins but had no power to help them fix them. In other words, the Law was diagnostic and not remedial.

One of my colleagues put it this way... Do you do things for your Mom to earn her love or because you are loved? There's a big difference between washing dishes because you don't want your mom to get mad at you and choosing to wash the dishes to make her happy and show how much you love her.

Paul believed, now that Jesus had come, that those in Christ have grown up. As he wrote in the letter to the Corinthians¹, *"When I was a child, I spoke as a child. Now that I am an adult, I have put aside childish ways."*

Some of the important social signifiers of Paul's day, like Jew and Gentile or slave and free, might not be as important in ours, but we still have our own preoccupation with distinctions that divide us: whether they are racial or economic, about sexual orientation or even political affiliation. There are congregations (and even families) that remain separated by just these kinds of differences.

In Paul's day, it was revolutionary for Jews and Gentiles to live together in the church. It was a radical demonstration of the power of Jesus and the Gospel to be able to unite those who were previously separated. Paul would say that being *"in Christ"* was now the most

¹ 1 Corinthians 13

important social signifier, and all others were lesser identities, though not erased, were no longer divisive.

The problem... then and now... is when we retreat to our respective silos, we just might miss out on the opportunity to get to know and love each other, and hear each other's point of view. Paul would say that when we do this, we have not grown up into the freedom into which Christ has set us free.

In our day of fragmented identity, the church (at its best) holds together people who may disagree on many matters, but still cling to unity in Jesus Christ.

For the world to flourish (if not to survive) we need more grown-ups - people who can look beyond the tribal human distinctions of "not our kind" to find the common humanity that resides in all God's children.

Humans are hard-wired to be tribal. Millenia of evolution taught us to trust our own people and to mistrust strangers. When we are fearful, we tend to look for scapegoats and enemies. We see the "Other" as a threat and dehumanize them. Once you have dehumanized the "Other" you gain license to treat them badly. Too often we have seen this in mass persecutions of minority groups around the world.

We may not think Paul's arguments against the Law apply to us today, but let's ponder the kind of exclusionary rules we operate on. They may not even be written down, but think about those subtle social indicators that tell us who is acceptable and who isn't, who is really welcome and who is not.

I recently saw a picture of a church sign that said, *"I would rather be excluded because of the people I include than be included because of the people I exclude."*

Finally, it's also true that people grow up at different rates, so the church needs to be respectful and loving toward those who are still stuck in whatever today's version of the Law might be. I am convinced that the church of Jesus Christ is one of God's human experiments to show the world how different people can live in community together despite their differences. May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen.