

I'm going to "nerd out" a bit on Paul this week. I'm sorry. I'll try to keep it under control as best as I can. We have this three-week mini-series going through Galatians, and it's such a powerful letter with so many overlapping layers of meaning in so few sentences...not a few words, but these deeply interconnected thoughts that translators have struggled to punctuate throughout history. There's a reason that we spend so much time studying and learning from Paul's letters. They tend to form the interpretive lens through which we try to understand the good news revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

And if we're going to use Paul's writing as a lens, then we have to understand what that lens means. We have to pay attention to the setting in which Paul was writing – including the challenges he is offering to the worldview of his day. In short, we can very easily misinterpret Paul's message if we forget what he was trying to accomplish. At his core, Paul was a Jewish Pharisee. He may have received a new vision of the Messiah on the road to Damascus, and that changed his entire outlook on God and faith, but it didn't change the fact that he had been raised in the Jewish tradition and was constantly engaged with that community.

Keep in mind that while we tend to think about what Paul did to form the Christian church, Paul was engaging with Jewish Christians as much as he was engaging with Gentile Christians. The setting of this growing movement was not pitted directly against the Jews, it was a movement **within** the Jewish community. It was an attempt to realize the covenantal promise of the Messiah, through the revelation of Jesus. It wasn't an attack against the Jewish faith. It was a reinterpretation of the covenant in light of Jesus...and the realities of the Empire.

Paul's letter to the Galatians, therefore, was not a vindictive screed against other Jews who were focused on circumcision. It was an attempt to abolish the binary thinking that played into worldly power. The foundational

identity of these Jewish and Gentile Christians was not an either or between them and the Jewish community, or a conflict between who does or doesn't follow Jewish law. Paul was drawing them together to be a movement in opposition to the Empire, to the power of Rome, to the power of this world. He doesn't reject the law – as in the Torah – he reinterprets that law in light of the power of Rome, in light of the power of sin and death that was so much at work in the life of an early follower of Jesus.

Binary thinking was the enemy. Either/or thinking was ingrained into the life of these first-century people so much so that they found themselves being carved up by the Roman occupiers to keep them powerless. And the Jewish and Gentile Christians were doing the same thing to themselves. They were arguing about the relevance of circumcision and eating practices instead of recognizing their common faith – faith in Christ Jesus. Faith in Christ Jesus meant an end to the binary. “There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

If we lose sight of Paul's opposition to Roman power, then this conversation about binaries quickly becomes an argument of us vs. them – whoever **they** are. It's so easy to fall into the trap of the binary because it forms the power structure of society. If you take any particular argument we're having about living together as citizens of the world, I would suspect you can narrow it down to a binary conflict: us/them, rich/poor, heterosexual/homosexual, white/brown, conservative/liberal...and the list goes on and on.

Before you think I'm suggesting that we simply find some middle ground where we can all just get along, I would remind you that Paul's writings were intended to **undo** the power of the empire for the sake of the way of Jesus. We can't separate ourselves from the world and expect to be left alone. That's just another binary. We can't take over the world for the sake of Jesus because that's just another us/them binary...and antithetical to the cross.

We have to dig deeper into Paul's claims about the kingdom of God and recognize how destructive binary thinking is. Since I've already hinted a bit at today's politics, I'll say it directly. Binary thinking – us vs. them mentality – puts us squarely on the side of the Empire and not one in Christ. That's what you see if you turn on the news. One group being pitted against another, with the group in power claiming it's "us vs. them"...or else. Anytime you draw a line between people, you are reinforcing the power of the world and working against God. It's really easy to point fingers at those who have it wrong. It's really easy to claim to be on the right side of history or the right side of God, but anytime we do, **we're** drawing that line; **we're** reinforcing the law; **we're** following the way of the empire.

At our council meeting this past week, Winnie Hall closed our meeting with prayer. I asked her to share that prayer with me so I could share something she said with you. As she led us in prayer, she prayed, "Give us the wisdom and strength to call our leaders to turn from fear, greed and hatred. Help us to help them understand that **they** are children of God and need not fear anymore."

Winnie's words struck me because they acknowledge how much we struggle to stay out of binary thinking and instead live into the idea that we are one in Christ – that we are all Children of God. Instead of simply praying for God to change **their** minds so that they would agree with us, we prayed for the end of fear that keeps us stuck in the power of this world; fear that makes retreat into binary thinking, us vs. them.

Paul wrote to the people in Galatia not so that they could claim special status within the kingdom of God, not so that they would have exclusive understanding of the revelation of God in Christ Jesus. Paul wrote a letter that told them how we all – **all of us** – are children of God. And therefore heirs of God's promise. No longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male and female, no longer Democrat or Republican, no longer Israeli or Iranian, no longer...no longer a slave to the binary thinking of power, but all children of God. Amen.