

I Died, Christ Lives (26May19)
from Galatians 1 & 2

I'd like to issue an apology to you.

I'm sorry for being just me.

More to the point, I apologize that I went quick as I could through college straight to seminary to become a pastor. I can't say I passed it all with easy flying colors, but I eventually got the proper accreditations to be validated for this.

In that direct trajectory, I apologize I didn't have the foresight to have been a rich lawyer steeped in rabid atheism beforehand. I wasn't even one who strayed from the church for a time.

I further apologize for not having something thrilling like a prison record and awful criminal past to show how far I was gone and how much my life has changed, to illustrate my conversion.

In spite of a bit of homophobia when I was part of a fundamentalist youth group, and that I remain a male in a patriarchal culture, and a white person in this racist society, still I don't have all that oppressive or hate-filled of a personal history behind me.

Heck, I'm even kind of a local boy, a native Wisconsinite. I could've had the wherewithal at least to be from somewhere a little questionable, outside of the norm, slightly shady. Like Illinois.

I know it's not a flashy resume for grace and God's unconditional welcome. And I apologize for that inconvenience for you as I preach.

I also know it seems backward, that I'm apologizing for *not* having done something wrong, but the lack of such experience may still be a problematic distraction. Although I'll continue to have plenty of real reasons to apologize to you, if in these ways today it may seem like I'm a goodie-two-shoes, then you have the odd impetus not to trust this message of grace, instead saying, "What does he know anyway?!"

Now, a number of you don't really like Paul. That's a fine attitude, but you probably don't like Paul for the wrong reasons. You may have some idea of him as curmudgeonly and strict and chauvinistic and who knows what else. I'll defend him against those, because I find him absolutely

full of life and love as he points so clearly to Jesus and away from all the other garbage.

Still, Paul should be awfully unlikeable, not for what he is, but what he was. He names it of himself at the start of this letter to the Galatian churches. He says he was violent and was a persecutor, trying to destroy gatherings of Christians. Not in the form of bombing churches, but doing everything he could to make life both miserable and brief for followers of Jesus. But then it changed. What he thought was right was wrong. Jesus got to him, and the good news worked on him, and he saw things very, very differently. It was a revelation.

So here's the conundrum: his message of God's love seems more valid because it was so far from his past, such a change. He's believable exactly because you'd have doubted anybody like him would ever say it.

In Bible study this week, we sought examples of what it would be like to be confronted with one who had threatened to kill you now allegedly not only on your side, but a prime witness testifying on your behalf. We thought of presidents, and racists who saw the light, of convicts who reformed their ways.

My categories to start leaned in that direction, that the very things that could have disqualified me or made me not to be relied on would be seen as benefits, as qualifications. It reverses what would usually make a credible message and messenger, the paradox that the worse you were the better you are.

Some churches use this model. Where the stronger story of a conversion experience is an endorsement of potential. The sense that the calling comes from God and not from humans can also hold sway, as a person says God laid it on their heart to preach the word, so it doesn't go through denominational channels like seminary, just as Paul said he didn't get permission from any church hierarchy.

But the funny thing is that those attempts to show grace's freedom can end up becoming legalistic all over again. The effort to show no qualification becomes its own qualifier. It's not in

our personal stories (or the lack of them), but only and always centered in Jesus. Certain characteristics may make it occasionally seem more shocking but don't make it more true.

So apologies again that you've only got me as a preacher. But you've still got Jesus.

I'll similarly accept your confession that you're only you, except for Jesus.

Paul was also dealing with that in his community, their search for personal proof or verification though this can only be trusted. It remains unseen. In that time, within this Bible reading, there were two qualifiers operating, ways they tried to become insiders and find some certainty they were doing okay. One was a restricted diet, keeping kosher. The other was circumcision. I trace Paul as particularly against circumcision because it clearly left out half of all people: women who couldn't wear such a mark of being an insider and would never have that proof. But at the root, the problem with either is an insistence that Jesus isn't enough, that you need something else, something more, that there is a way to prove you've got it.

We still struggle with this. We still want it verified. We operate as if God's love has contingencies. In some way, we want it to be dependent on us, don't really like that God loves you not because of who you are or anything you've done but for Christ's sake. We want to know what to do, how to become more spiritual or more peaceful or more generous, to be converted from our old ways. That may happen, but not *per se*, for an end result. Those would be incidental byproducts.

One really insidious form is with prayers for healing, that it should mean somehow our believing will be evidenced in our bodies, and that then there's a right way for our bodies to look or be or feel if God is with us. Health and wellness are taken as marks of faith.

But Paul very clearly refuses to look at his body. I have died, he says. A dead body isn't much of a place to hunt for evidence of goodness and blessing. So we instead look only to the body of Jesus. Since through his crucifixion, as God has

died, all have died. And, with Easter, you're already a new creation, as good as raised from death to new life. Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Another of the main forms of losing focus on Jesus as we try to be right is in making church about what *we* do. About getting our lives in order. About your involvement here. About doing good in the world. About striving for justice and being on the right side of some cause. I know you carry burdens that you ought to be better, that you should do more in the community, that you want this to make more of a difference. Again, those can happen, but not because of our efforts, but as byproducts of grace.

Austin Channing Brown for our book discussion this week wrote of the goal in reconciliation like the wolf lying down with the lamb. No matter how good you are with animals or how woke for racial justice, good luck on that without Jesus.

Again though, Paul says we have died. Dead people may not do much good in the community, can't be rallied to be better people, won't fix creation. Try giving a pep talk to a crowd of dead folks and you won't expect much for results.

That's why sermons aren't pep talks. They aren't encouragements to go back out there and try harder. They aren't motivational self-helps. They aren't lists of things you should be doing. Partly it's because none of that works, none of it makes you more godly or more loving, none of it is all that effective, trying to convince a bunch of dead people.

But it's also that none of it really matters. It's so trifling and a distraction from the main thing. God came to be with you, to love you, to be in relationship. God died for you, and speaks the word now that raises you, fills you with new eternal life. God is restoring creation and all relations, but you want to get trivial and make it about the little things you do? It's like you've been freely admitted to the college of your dreams and then figure it's dependent on how pointy your pencils are sharpened. It's as good as irrelevant!

You want to be better, are worried about how much you need to do, don't feel like you are good

enough? Well Paul asks, will we get it right all the time? Clearly not. We're still going to be sinners. But that doesn't invalidate Christ, since nothing we do or don't do can prove or disprove God's love. So Paul won't worry about what to eat or what to wear or how holy he's acting. In Luther's terms, we don't even get too hung up on right decisions. His advice was to "be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death, and the world."^{*}

When the emphasis falls back on the trivia of oughts and shoulds as if those are the important thing, as if this is about anything we can do, then we're tearing down the identity and the relationship and the righteousness that is only established in grace. We're looking for life in our essentially dead selves rather than in the gift from God. We're trying to muster resurrection on our own, when in the end our confidence, our joyful message is: Alleluia! Christ is risen!