

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“From Paul, an apostle, to DCPC”
Galatians 1:1-12
Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 6, 2010**

Paul wrote more of the New Testament than anybody else. What he wrote is in the form of letters.

Paul wrote a lot of letters, and the one that we will be reading today and for the next few Sundays was written to the Galatian churches.

Before we move into the reading of Galatians 1, let's try to put ourselves in the Galatians' place, imagining ourselves to be living in the area which is now southern Turkey during the reign of the Roman Emperor Claudius. Most of our neighbors worship one or another of the local gods or goddesses. Some of them even worship the Emperor himself, and with him the power of Rome. And we, we are the minority. We are Jews. We are Jews feeling itchy and threatened by the growing power of the Empire, not to mention that our kids are always coming home and saying, "But Brutus down the street, his parents let him..." or "Calpurnia, at school, she gets to..."

That's the kind of daily pagan peer pressure we were under when Paul showed up unannounced on our synagogue doorstep one Sabbath evening. We invited him in to be the guest preacher. He started with what we already knew: that there is one God, the world's creator, but then he told us some unbelievable, quite shocking good news. He told us that our God had unveiled the long-awaited plan for the world and that the unveiling took place in a Jew named Jesus. He said that Jesus is the Messiah, the king-to-end-all-kings, which made us very glad that we hadn't invited our neighbors whose chariot bumper is plastered with King Claudius stickers to come along with us to synagogue that night. Jesus had been executed by the Romans; that is what the Empire does, often enough, to kings who threaten it, but Paul told us that our one true God raised Jesus from the dead.

And that wasn't all. It was just the beginning of the good news that Paul shared with us. According to Paul, Jesus' death and resurrection mean that this God is now building a new family, a single family, a family with no divisions, no separate races, no one-table-for-Jews-and-another-for-Gentiles nonsense. That is what Paul told us. He also told us to get busy and start living this way and building that kind of community right here in Galatia. And he up and left us, heading off to stir up the people in some other synagogue down the road somewhere. (1)

Paul had been gone for awhile when the people in the Galatian churches received the letter which we now know as Galatians. With them, we listen now for God's word to us.

There can be good reasons for getting mad.

On the lighter side, one might judge that Detroit Tiger Armando Galarraga has reason to be mad after being robbed of a perfect 27-out game by the umpire's ghastly call of "safe" at first base. Galarraga didn't get mad, as every baseball fan knows by now. While it has been nice to witness some public civility for once, the grace of the abashed umpire's apology and the pitcher's acceptance of it amid the whole Sports Talk Radio hoopla, most of us would understand if he had joined his Tiger teammates who were hopping around like angry bees whose hive had been disturbed. There are some things that are worth getting mad about, and, while it's not the biggest deal in the world, not getting your name in the baseball record books when every second of video proves that you earned it, could be one of them.

On the more serious side, most of us are pretty mad about the oil catastrophe in the Gulf. Indeed, it seems, one of the things that seemed to make some people maddest is that the President didn't seem to be mad enough. The usually even-keeled Thomas Friedman wrote, "Mr. President...A disaster is a terrible thing to waste." (2) The usually histrionic Maureen Dowd amped up her outrage, "President Spock's behavior is illogical." (3) As for O'Reilly, Beck, and Limbaugh, let's not even go there.

You can decide for yourself whether Paul most resembles Friedman, Dowd, O'Reilly, Beck, or Limbaugh, but it's no exaggeration to say that Paul is really, really mad at the Galatian Christians. In others of Paul's letters which we read in the Bible, he begins his letters by greeting those to whom he is writing and then he engages in a little bit of pastoral schmoozing, verbally extending a hearty handshake to the men in the congregation, hugging the women, patting the little kids on the head, thanking them all and God for their faithfulness.

Not in Galatians. In firing his opening salvo on the Galatian Christians, Paul totally dispenses with all the ecclesiastical niceties. Verbally, he strides into the middle of the congregation to whom he is writing, shoulders squared and eyes flashing sparks of anger, and he throws down the gauntlet in a tone that every preaching professor I have ever known cautions students to avoid (4), saying, "I can't believe your fickleness—how easily you have turned traitor to him who called you by the grace of Christ by embracing a variant message." (Gal. 1:6, *The Message*)

Those are some strong words, and Paul clearly believes that the Galatians deserve this apostolic tongue-lashing. Their sin? Their sin is not that they have turned to something dark and sinister; rather, their temptation comes in the form of an alternative that still has something about it that looks appropriate and right. In saying that non-Jews had to observe the Mosaic law, that is, to become circumcised, celebrate the Jewish festivals, and observe the kosher food laws, in order to gain a place at the family dinner table and share fully in the inheritance promised to God's people, these Galatian Christians had both added to and watered down the good news which Paul had preached to them. (5)

"I cannot believe that you...." Paul wrote to the Galatian Christians, calling them back to Jesus and his good news.

“I cannot believe that you...” Paul wrote to the Galatian Christians, and sitting alongside them and alongside you, his words make me squirm for surely Paul’s words are aimed at me, at you, at the community of faith which is Davidson College Presbyterian Church, just as surely as they were aimed at our brothers and sisters in first-century Turkey.

I wish that weren’t true. Oh, how I wish it weren’t true. I would much rather come to the Table of the Lord this morning basking in Paul’s approval and curtsying to his applause, wouldn’t you? And surely coming to the Lord’s Table and claiming identity as Christians is above all about hearing our names called in love, as the hymn that we will sing in a moment affirms. But coming to the Lord’s Table is also about examining our lives in the light of the gospel, and Paul’s sharp words, his being mad about the way that one community of faith both added to and watered down the gospel, are a microscope for helping us to examine the ways in which we distort the gospel and a scalpel for slicing away our rationalization and blindness to our own unfaithfulness. Paul’s words lead us to ask ourselves how we add to the gospel by expecting people to dress a certain way, to have gone to school for a certain number of years, by behaving a certain way or judging that someone’s kids should act a certain way, by expecting someone to be a certain kind of person. Paul’s words draw us into an examination of our deepest motives, so that our hearts can be newly opened to what Jesus is doing in our lives, in this community of faith, in the world.

Yes, there are some things which are worth getting mad about. And some of those things lodge deep within our hearts. Some of those things are things that lodge in our hearts are those that we have come mistake as appropriate and right, but in the light of God, are less than faithful. And so, as we come to the Lord’s Table, let us examine ourselves as Paul calls our hearts back to Jesus and his good news, good news which brings hope to the hopeless, good news which offers forgiveness with no boundaries, good news which binds up wounds and offers new possibilities for all.

1. Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians* (London: SPCK, 2004), 4-5.
2. Thomas L. Friedman, “Malia for President,” *The New York Times*, May 30, 2010.
3. Maureen Dowd, “Once More, With Feeling,” *The New York Times*, May 30, 2010.
4. David L. Bartlett, “Preaching to Galatians,” *Interpretation*, Vol. 54, No. 3, July 2000, 280.
5. Jack Albright, “Stand Firm in Freedom: Summer Lectons from Galatians,” *Quarterly Review*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Spring 1995, 90, and Craig Koester, “Opportunity to Do Good: The Letter to the Galatians,” *Word and World*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 1989, 184.