

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor**  
**“Christ Living in Us”**  
**Galatians 2: 11-21**  
**Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**June 13, 2010**

Paul, red-faced, veins on his neck bulging out, was exerting some kind of energy as his quill bore down hard on the parchment that was to become his letter to the Galatian churches. He was all over them about the extra rules and regs that some of them were adding to Jesus’ gospel of freedom. In piling on requirements like getting circumcised and observing the kosher dietary laws, they were watering down the good news that had come to them through Jesus’ death and resurrection, the good news that God is at work building a new family, a single family, a family with no divisions, no separate races, no one-table-for-Jews-and-another-for-Gentiles. (1)

We pick up our reading of the Galatians’ mail now just as Paul has gone into some detail about a certain meeting that had taken place in Jerusalem where the opinions of the pillars of this new church had bumped up against each other over the ways things should and should not be done.

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Paul writes, “Have some of you noticed that we are not yet perfect?” (Gal. 2: 17-18, *The Message*)

A translation purist would point out that Eugene Peterson’s rendering of the verse is loose, at best. But the sense of it, even they would have to agree, I think, is right on target.

Here was a church that was struggling to find and claim its identity as a community of faith in a challenging environment.

Here was Peter. The real Peter was the Peter who knew deep in his bones that in Jesus the Messiah, God had created one new family consisting of both Jews and Gentiles. It would have been hard to live like that after a lifetime of thinking of Gentiles as almost a different species, but Peter had been doing it. Then, just as when Peter walked on the water and looked down at the waves of the sea lapping up about his knees and the fear that he felt hardened his feet into stones that started him sinking, so something like that happens again when the hard-liners show up. So Peter holds the mask of Jewish respectability in front of his real face, which means that for the moment--just for the moment, just for one single, little minute, and who would have a problem with that, he probably rationalizes--he will separate himself from the Gentile Christians. (2)

Here was Peter.

And here was Paul.

Paul, the same Paul who wrote “love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or arrogant or rude,” this Paul has gotten so agitated with Peter that he writes convoluted and incomplete sentences. We can almost hear him sputtering with anger between the lines of butchered syntax. (3) “Peter, you’ve been

living like a Gentile, making no distinction between Jews and non-Jews. How can you now insist, as your behavior is insisting, on Gentiles becoming Jews in order to become part of God's family?" (4)

Here was Peter and here was Paul. Both were part of a church that was struggling to find and claim its identity as a community of faith in a challenging environment. They were imperfect people who together with other imperfect people were facing a challenging situation, and as is generally the case, challenging situations can bring out the best and the worst in imperfect human beings.

I remember the church where I grew up. What I remember is how loved I felt there as a young pony-tailed girl swinging her ankleted, patent-leathered feet while sitting on the second pew with my parents, sister, and brothers. My mother said she liked sitting on the second pew because the hats that the other women were wearing didn't distract her from the sermons, but I've since wondered how many of those women wearing hats we wiggly McGregor children distracted! But no one, not one single person, ever told me that I was a distraction; they only told me that they loved me, and they loved my shiny hair!

I don't remember any turmoil in that church, but I have since learned that there was a good bit of turmoil in that Southern Presbyterian congregation in the late 50's and early 60's, that acid words got splashed around at Session meetings, that some stopped giving money to the church, that the most extreme wanted the preacher fired because of what he preached about equality. And while I don't know this for a fact, it could very well have been that some of those same people who told me how much I was loved were also thinking and saying some pretty vicious things about people of color who might try to enter and attend a worship service at our church.

Challenging situations can bring out the best and the worst in imperfect people.

Galatians spoke to churches in the first century, and the letter speaks to churches in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It speaks to all churches which are facing challenging situations.

Which brings us to DCPC.

I'd like to spend a bit of time now sharing with you what has happened since Shelli Latham shared the news that she will be accepting a call today to serve as Associate Pastor for Preaching at Westminster Presbyterian in West Chester, Pennsylvania. I will speak first about what has transpired this past week; second, about what is going to happen today; and finally, about the future that God opens before us all.

Last Sunday evening, Shelli shared the news of her call with the Session. There was sadness among all of us who treasure her faithful ministry; there was also joy that God is calling her to the next stopping-off place in her journey of life and ministry. Linda Griffeth offered a prayer which expressed this in breathtaking way.

The Session then acted upon some recommendations regarding interim staffing. I will say some more about this in a moment.

The Associate Pastor Nominating Committee which is conducting a search for an associate pastor for campus ministry, young adults, and young families learned the news when they convened for their regularly scheduled meeting later on Sunday evening. They learned of Shelli's impending

departure, and much time was spent in discussing the future of the APNC's search. On Tuesday evening, APNC chair Stephanie Shryock and APNC member Betsy Lyles met with the Administration, Personnel, and Planning Committee to share some of the discussion. The APNC's accountability is to you, the congregation, who elected them; still, they decided it would be a good thing to engage in conversation with AP&P about this matter, telling them that they discerned three possible avenues: continuing the search as they had planned, putting the search on hold until the already-planned visioning retreat takes place in late summer, or asking the congregation to dissolve the current APNC so that DCPC might take a broader look at overall staffing in light of Shelli's departure. The APNC has met again this morning. (Note: The APNC decided to "pause" in their search to await the outcome of the visioning retreat planned for late summer.)

Regarding interim staffing, here is what has been decided by the Session so far. A youth advisory committee has been formed to search for one full-time or two part-time youth directors. Catherine Bragg is chairing the group; she is joined by two youth: Rachel Mazur and George Lyles, and two other adults close to the youth program: Linda Griffeth and Gordon Clark.

Should the APNC decide that they will put the search on hold or ask the congregation to dissolve the committee, the Session, at its stated meeting next Wednesday, will be asked by AP&P to approve Krista Welch's remaining as student pastor for campus ministry until May and to agree to the appointment of a committee to search for an interim associate pastor.

This has happened this past week. Today, we will be holding a "Church House Meeting," something like a "Town Hall Meeting" in the best sense of that term. We know that there hasn't been much notice, but it seems good for us to gather together in the spirit of asking questions and offering insights in this challenging time, taking to heart what Paul wrote, "Indeed, I have been crucified with Christ. My ego is no longer central. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."

We will begin with a prayer here in the sanctuary at 12:15 and end by 12:45. There will be time for you to get some lemonade and a cookie before the meeting. Child care is available. We will record the meeting, so that if you cannot stay, you can come by the church after Tuesday and borrow a CD this week and listen to it. Stephanie Shryock will tell us all what path the APNC has prayerfully discerned they will seek to follow. Elder John Bragg will share some thoughts. There will be time for questions and response. I hope this will be the first of many "Church House Meetings." Who knows, they may even become a tradition around here.

And what about the future?

You can count on a timely report of what transpires at next Wednesday's Session meeting. You can count on being invited to offer your input and become involved in the process all along the way. You can count on the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit at every point on the DCPC journey so that the challenges that we are bound to face along the way will bring out the best and not the worst in us.

And...as for what the future looks like, I got a glimpse of that this past week thanks to 5 ½ -year-old Sydney Shryock. The other day, Sydney's mom, Stephanie S., let's call her, Stephanie Rollans, our Director of Congregational Life, and I were standing in that narrow, rather dark hall outside Stephanie R's and my offices, chatting about something or other. You know, I've always thought of that part of our building as, well, a hall...a way to get to and from our offices. Not Sydney. She looked at that hall,

and what she saw was a track. A track that was perfect for her to run lap after lap after lap, round and round and round, laughing with joy at every stride.

Now that is imagination. In just this past week, I've witnessed imagination in DCPC's seeing new possibilities like Sydney did. I have heard some talk about a new class for parents of teens, and even some people stepping up to volunteer to lead the class...without even being asked. I have heard the staff decide at our seasonal planning meeting last Tuesday that if the Worship Committee says it is okay, then we will resume our Saturday evening informal worship services on August 28. Everybody will have to work together to make these imaginative things and more like them happen. And did I mention money? We need that too, much more than our budget provides for and much more than our bank accounts now contain in order for these Holy Spirit-inspired things that we are beginning to and will continue to imagine to become something real that binds us together as a community of faith and equips us for our ministry to the world.

But I am not worried. I am not concerned at all about whether or not this challenging situation will bring out the best in us.

No, we are not perfect people, as Paul so aptly noted. As Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho, also an Anglican priest, have written in their new book *Made for Goodness* from which some of today's liturgy comes, "We do not always act out of love. Sometimes we act out our anger. Sometimes we act out our shame. Sometimes we act out our jealousy, our insecurity, our pride, and our resentment...No, we do not love perfectly. But God does. And the more we come to emulate this divine love, the more our lives are an expression of the goodness that is at the heart of each of us." (5)

Or as Paul put it, "It is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us."

1. Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians* (London: SPCK, 2004), 4-5.
2. *Ibid.*, 22-23.
3. Richard B. Hays, "Letter to the Galatians," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. XI (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 221.
4. Wright, 23.
5. Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *Made for Goodness And Why This Makes All the Difference* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 25.