

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“Covenant Between Equals”
Galatians 3: 23-29
Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 20, 2010

Today we continue reading the mail of the Galatian Christians.

In verses 24 and 25 of this passage, there is a word that is difficult to translate into English, although the translators certainly do their best. The translators strike me as being a bit like high school girls in the dressing room trying on prom dresses, posing in front of the mirror as they look for the perfect fit. Here are some of the words that they use: tutor, disciplinarian, supervisor, babysitter, the one in charge. The actual Greek word is *paidagogos*. It is the word from which the English word *pedagogy*, referring to the art and practice of teaching, derives, and it has a quite specific meaning in the context in which Paul writes. A *paidagogos* was not technically a teacher, but a slave who led children to and from school. Aesop, the teller of fables, was said to have been a *paidagogos*. According to Paul, Torah, the law, has served as a *paidagogos*. But a new day has dawned, according to Paul. In this excerpt from the epistle, he presents a vision of what humanity transformed by the death and resurrection of Jesus, humanity no longer in need of a *paidagogos*, looks like.

For Paul, following Jesus was all about freedom. You remember how it was that Paul had been traveling the road to Damascus. The very Wind-Breath-Spirit of God knocked Paul off his feet, and Jesus sucked the stale, malodorous air that Paul had been breathing down the necks of Christians right out of him. It was one of those luminous experiences which simply shimmer with light and love, when we can literally see God all over the place and feel God inside of us too, softening up the hardness and resentment and prejudice and selfishness that is inside of us and has been weighing us down and flushing it all right out so that we feel ten pounds lighter.

What Paul discovered on that luminous day and what he continued to discover throughout his life and ministry and what energized his very being so completely that he couldn't restrain himself from writing letter after letter about it was that Jesus had come among us to free us ...to free us, whoever we are, from whatever would keep us from loving and from being loved and, and thus freed, then, to teach us to “bear the beams of love” one to another, to borrow a phrase from William Blake, so that we might live together in a covenant of equals, as someone has called it.

I've just finished reading a wonderful book entitled *Tattoos on the Heart*. The author is a Jesuit priest, Fr. Gregory Boyle, known as “G” by the gang members, the homies and the homegirls, in the Los Angeles neighborhood where he has lived and worked with them since 1986. The title of the book comes from an experience with a particularly exasperating young man named Sharkey. G had tried everything he could think of to get through to Sharkey, but a

fleeting thought came to him: why not switch his strategy and decide to catch Sharkey in the act of doing the right thing? Fr. Boyle writes, “I can see I have been too harsh and exacting with him, and he is, after all, trying the best he can. I tell him how heroic he is and how the courage he now exhibits in transforming his life far surpasses the hollow ‘bravery’ of his barrio past. I tell him he is a giant among men. I mean it. Sharkey seems to be thrown off balance by all this and silently stares at me. Then he says, ‘[Man,] G...I’m gonna tattoo that on my heart.’” (1)

I could keep you here all day telling you luminous stories from Fr. Boyle’s book about the freedom that comes to deeply wounded people when they absorb the truth that they are loved and that their lives are important and use their freedom to bear the beams of love one to another, but I will content myself with sharing only one.

At nineteen years old, Anthony had been on his own for quite awhile. His parents had disappeared long ago in a maelstrom of heroin use and prison time. He was living in his beat-up car. Fr. Boyle met Anthony through his probation officer. “Help this kid,” she pled.

One day the two of them, G and Anthony, were leaning up against his car, and their conversation drifted toward the “what do you want to be when you grow up” theme.

“I want to be a mechanic. Don’t know nothing ‘bout cars, really. But I’d like to learn it.”

As it happened, G’s mechanic, Dennis, was something of a legend in the barrio. He could fix any car. A tall, pole-thin, Japanese-American in his early sixties, Dennis was a chain smoker. He was not just a man of few words—he was a man of no words at all. He just smoked. People would bring their cars in, complaining of some noise under the hood. They would hand the keys to Dennis who would stand there with a cigarette dangling from his lips. He would take the keys and when the owner returned the next day, he’d give the person the car back, purring as it should be. No words were exchanged in the entire transaction.

G goes to Dennis to plead his case.

“Look, Dennis. Hire this kid Anthony. True enough he doesn’t know anything about cars, but he sure is eager, and I think he could learn stuff.”

Dennis just stares and smokes.

G redoubles his efforts. He tells Dennis that this won’t just be one job for one gang member but will create a ripple effect of peace in the entire neighborhood. Dennis just smokes. This will alter the course of history; it will change the world as we know it, G pleads. Dennis just smokes. Finally, G gives up. And then, just as he is about to stand up and be on his way, Dennis takes one last drag on his cigarette, releases the smoke so that it wafts in front of his face, and he says the only words he says that day, “I will teach him everything I know.”

And so Anthony becomes a mechanic. “I learned how to do a lube job today,” he would tell G. “I fixed a carburetor all by myself.”

Then one day, Anthony hands G a photograph. There is Anthony, with a broad smile, face smudged with axle grease, work shirt with ANTHONY embroidered proudly on his chest. No question, to look at Anthony's face is to know that Anthony is a transformed man. But standing next to him in the picture, with an arm around Anthony is Dennis, cigarette hanging out of his mouth, but otherwise an equally changed human being. (2)

Anthony and Dennis. Could this be a manifestation of the freedom toward which Paul is pressing us when he wrote, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. 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"?

I believe that it is.

This kinship between Anthony and Dennis, this luminous picture of a covenant of equals, is given to us because of Jesus Christ. To be sure, for you and me, the light and air and freedom of knowing ourselves to be loved and capable of loving, bearing beams of light to others is not likely to be experienced in a Los Angeles barrio. But ...

Perhaps it will take place this Father's Day afternoon in your own house when, dwelling in the freedom of Christ, you, in some way that you've never attempted before, undertake the forging of peace with your father or your memory of your father, with your son, with your daughter.

Perhaps it will take place this week when you look into the eyes of the person who is scanning your groceries or when you speak with a customer service representative on the phone and you remember that you are bound together with him or her in a covenant of equals and your annoyance begins to melt away.

Perhaps it will take place in your making a conscious decision to move through your days living according to the strategy of catching people in the act of doing the right thing, and not the wrong thing.

Following Jesus is all about freedom, according to Paul, the freedom to live in the tenderness of God's love and grace within a covenant of equals.

1. Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (New York: Free Press, 2010), xiv.
2. *Ibid.*, 77.