

The 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity

Gal. 6: 11-18

Mt. 6: 24-34

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

At first glance the 2 passages for today may seem to have virtually nothing in common. And to make things a bit more confusing, we have to confess that St. Paul's rambling on about circumcision ranks down, on a scale of 1-50, slightly below our horizons of concern! Yet, there is intensity in both texts that should alert us to pay attention. (This is also true, by the way, of the Psalms in M.P. today-10 & 49)

Galatians is a letter. Paul says, "See with what large letters I have written in my own hand..." In ancient Hellenistic correspondence a person might use a scribe or secretary to pen a letter. It usually took one of three forms: 1) the writer told the scribe to send a letter to someone and make it a general conversation; 2) the writer would ask the scribe to send a letter and outline specifics with the scribe filling in other items; 3) the matter was of such import that the writer penned the letter him or herself. What is at stake for Paul is at this third level. And notice, he does not follow the usual style of greeting people by name or sending them the 'kiss of peace'. He is upset, very focused, and recounting the heart of his message. That message is about what is behind circumcision—namely, IDENTITY. (It was like back in the 60's when we grew our hair long and our parents were convinced it was degradation and we thought it was the height of identity. Now 50 years later it amounts to naught!) What is it that defines our sense of who we are in this world; what is the driving engine or energy in us that if it were not present, we would falter? For Paul it is the cross of Christ; God's ultimate act of redeeming the world and all of us. That is the cosmic center of existence!

I want to suggest that the message in Galatians is a specific situation, which echoes Jesus' words in Matthew. For Jesus, too, is posing the question: What defines your sense of yourself in relation to what happens around and inside you?

A former CEO of a social ministry organization and a long-time friend has become well known over in Burlington for his snippy aphorisms and maxims. Most of them are tinged with a certain amount of humor while at the same time carrying an element of truth that is not easily missed. During discussions about various projects to improve the lives of the people he was serving he would from time to time let slip comments like, "you can give up your body to burned, and someone will ask for more", or "if it's free, I'll take 2". But one saying in particular stood out—"all of life is a trade-off"! Consider that seriously for a moment—"All of life IS a trade-off". It is a short version of acknowledging two important realities. One is that we cannot have it all; in spite of slick advertising to the contrary, or our own illusions, some things or relationships we desire are simply incompatible with others

and cannot be held at the same time. It is manifestly accurate that we cannot be driven by envy and feel a sense of satisfaction, or be consumed with enmity and hatred and simultaneously find inner peace. The other reality is that at some point in life we must make a choice about what we hold most dear; about what we value deeply enough to allow it to become the center around which all other aspects revolve, and by which we judge the importance of other items that make their way into our lives. The decision about what or who will guide us along the path is inevitable. Watch someone without core values and you will witness what it means to be at the whim of one's own emptiness. Even if we avoid making a conscious choice one will be made and become the manner we rely on to approach living. Making such choices is very close to what the Church means when it calls us to and speaks about repentance, for repentance is nothing less than de-selecting some ways of living, and becoming open to others that are more life-giving. It is the struggle of living through and with being divided in our allegiances until one gives way and another rises to claim our devotion and become our dearest guide. Robert Frost gave this poetic expression in his work, "Stopping by the woods on a snowy evening", where the route taken must be decided and as he says, "I took the road less travelled and it has made all the difference!"

The Gospel text for today is from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is portrayed in the mode of Moses giving more additions to the Law. But if you read the text in context he constantly says, "You have heard of old this, but I say to you instead..." He is not heaping on more LAW, but deconstructing conventional wisdom and confronting us with a road less traveled. He poses questions that heighten our conflicts so that we can see what is actually at stake. Listen to some of these. "Is life not more than food?" "Are you not of more value than the birds which God feeds?" "Which of you by being anxious can add to their life?" He is asking us all to consider **what really drives us.** We enter into the conversation at midstream hearing, "You cannot serve both God and money". (All of life is a trade-off) On the surface it might seem to be a diatribe against having too much of the world's goods. But it is not a condemnation of wealth. It is asking the question, "What are we pursuing as the source of our security in this world?", and what is the result of that choice? We could restate this by saying, "you cannot live freely being bound to 2 opposing masters or claimants for our loyalty".

At some level of our being we do know the conflicts that occur in us as we seek to be secure and whole. And we likewise know how easy it is to fall into bondage, and be held captive, to ways of living that lead us away from that wholeness. I know of a seminary dean who served faithfully and tirelessly for years building the school into a quality educational facility. He was relentless in his pursuit to the exclusion

of most everything else in his life; family, friends, and self-care. The time came for retirement and the faculty, supporters, students, and board all gathered for a big celebration. The moment arrived for him to give his reaction to the pending closure of his work. It was a mixed moment for in his comments he shocked the audience by saying that they might as well have been writing his obituary! He simply could not imagine doing anything other than what he had been. He was so welded to it that it had come to define him and own him. He had become trapped between 2 masters. Sadly, he died about one year later having lost what he thought was most vital, when there was so much more available.

But now back to that question—what really drives us in our living? I think for most people it is to have a sense that we belong and are valued and loved and that our lives count for something. It is true that for some people simply getting to tomorrow is a painful reality. Having food to partake is not a “given”. But even in these situations the underlying concern is do I matter. Do the struggles we encounter disinherit us from having value in this life? It would be easy in these days of illness, strife, and uncertainty to view ourselves as accidents in an uncaring universe. This Gospel says NO to that. But we too often fail to hear that and instead of trusting God and the relationship he has with us we allow fear and worry and anxiety to slip through the back door and become the preoccupation that consumes our energy. Anxiety is an interesting word. It comes from the German “angst” which literally means a narrowing of the soul. It refers to living with tightness in the chest instead of breathing freely and at ease. It happens when we worry that the only thing that will get us through is us. It happens when our choice of allegiance is in the wrong places.

We often hear that the opposite of faith is unbelief. That is not entirely so. The opposite of faith is anxiety. It is bit like Satchel Paige's old adage, “Don't look back, something might be gaining on you”. Anxiety is the fear that there may be no Lord of life other than what we make. But the whole of the Christian faith points to a God who will go through hell and death and back to own us. Is not this our identity? We are God's servants, or slaves, and as a master insures the well-being of those who serve him, God certainly does no less. Are not the birds and the lilies and all creation sustained without making it so themselves?

Notice that Jesus does not say, “Stop worrying” because he knows that is not possible. Instead he reminds us of the simplest of realities. We belong to God first, last, in all things. Our challenge is not so much the difficulties life brings as it is refusing to buy the lie that those are our master. This Gospel, and it is Good News, is that it asks me to give up one of my most cherished preoccupations, being anxious, in favor of trusting God to provide my most basic needs. It first challenges me to

look where I have placed my trust, and to see that some of my loyalties are in conflict with my loyalty to God, but further it reminds me that God is far more loyal to me than I am to myself. The gift of this Gospel is that it undermines my attempts at creating security, so that it can be replaced with a radical trust in the One who values me above all things. When I come to rest in that I come to see something of the Kingdom of which God has made me a participant.

St. Augustine knew this well when he wrote a brief prayer. “O Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You”. All of life is indeed a trade-off. But it is not an equal trade. For the things we abandon to place God first are always worth far less than what that relationship gives. Amen+