

For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin;¹² for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

¹³You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. ¹⁴I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. ¹⁵But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased ¹⁶to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, ¹⁷nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.

¹⁸Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; ¹⁹but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother. ²⁰In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! ²¹Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, ²²and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; ²³they only heard it said, "The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy." ²⁴And they glorified God because of me.

¹Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. ²I went up in response to a revelation. Then I laid before them (though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain. ³But even Titus, who was with me, was not compelled to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. ⁴But because of false believers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might enslave us — ⁵we did not submit to them even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might always remain with you.

Eight years ago today, June 5th, on a hot and humid summer morning in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I was up at dawn to put on my cap and gown and spend the next several hours participating in the very intricately detailed choreography of graduation ceremonies at Harvard University. In 2008, I received my Master of Divinity degree from Harvard Divinity School, and one of the highlights of that day was listening to the university commencement speaker: J.K. Rowling, best known as the author of the *Harry Potter* series. I found her speech so inspiring that every year on June 5th, I look it up on YouTube and listen to it again! It was entitled, "The Fringe Benefits of Failure, and the Importance of Imagination," and it has meant more to me in these eight years than I could have fathomed when I first heard it. Failure and imagination are both key features of any new pastor's first years after graduation, and I suspect they will continue to be key in the years ahead as well!

I'm clearly not the only one who found her speech moving: Rowling's speech is still the most-viewed Harvard speech available online, and excerpts of the speech have even been made into a gift book to give graduates (no doubt someone is hoping to make a dent in Dr. Seuss' *Oh, The Places You'll Go!* corner on the market for gifts to give graduates). In the years since her speech, "failure" has been a prominent theme in commencement addresses. A lot of people, it seems, are copying J.K. Rowling's speech in hopes of capitalizing on her success with "failure"!

This kind of imitation is exactly what a previous commencement speaker had said is wrong with society, and what's wrong in particular with the church. Now, this isn't a speech I heard in person — this one was delivered in 1838 by Ralph Waldo Emerson. He was invited to give the commencement address at Harvard Divinity School several years after graduating from the school himself, and he used the opportunity to condemn the ways churches and preachers were relying on human traditions to convey faith. "Truth cannot be received secondhand," he said; the problem with copying what has come before is that you just end up with copies of copies of copies — and something is lost each time, as you get further and further away from the original. Emerson said the problem with the Church at the time, the reason so many people were leaving churches (yes, in 1838 this was perceived to be a big problem!), was that those many-times-copied versions of other people's experiences — human traditions — were becoming more important and being given more authority than the original — divine revelation.

Though he wasn't delivering a graduation speech to the Christians in Galatia, this is precisely the same issue the apostle Paul is addressing in the first chapter of Galatians we heard from today: what *is* the proper relationship between human tradition and divine revelation? If all we have to offer are passed-down human traditions, of what use can such faith be in a rapidly changing world? Is all we have to rely on reports of reports of reports of other people's experiences of the divine? And if so, how can we trust the truth of the gospel? Paul's detractors were saying all Paul had to go on were other people's reports about Jesus and so what he was saying couldn't be trusted.

There is a lot at stake in this issue, for Paul and for us. After all, Paul wasn't present to witness Jesus' ministry, or his death, resurrection, and ascension – so can he have authority to proclaim the good news? ...And can *we*, then, have any authority to share the gospel, this much further removed from those original events?

Both Paul and Emerson insist that they – and we—have access to revelation and not only to tradition, but they have different approaches on how to move forward from there. Emerson, the philosopher of American individualism, had by the time of his “Divinity School Address” moved outside the bounds of Christianity (as became evident in his delivery of the speech, and led to him being banned from speaking at the school for the next 30 years, until he became really famous!). Paul, on the other hand, one of the great orators of the Church, speaks from the center of our faith.

“Go it alone,” Emerson advises these young preachers at their graduation, as they prepare for the beginning of their ministry; don't look to other people or their experiences. But this is NOT Paul's advice! For all that Paul insists in Galatians 1 that he consulted with no one and spoke to nobody about the message he was proclaiming, he also tells us about the ways in which his divine revelation connected him to others. We know that his experience of the risen Christ appearing to him on the road to Damascus sent him to a man called Ananias, who helps Paul understand what has happened to him and how to respond. When the Christian community is afraid to welcome Paul, knowing he had been a persecutor of the Church and so not trusting him, it is Barnabas (the namesake of our congregation, whose saint's day we celebrate this Saturday, June 11th) who speaks up for Paul and ushers him into the community. And when Paul does go to Jerusalem to consult with the original apostles – not as their student, but as their equal; like them, he too has had divine revelation – he brings with him Barnabas, his mentor and a fellow Jewish Christian, as well as Titus, a Greek Christian. Barnabas and Titus are from different human traditions, but the gospel message has revealed Jesus Christ to both of them. Part of Paul's purpose in bringing both of them along to Jerusalem was to demonstrate that the divine revelation that united them in the body of Christ was bigger than any of the human traditions that separated them. The gospel is for everyone and draws people together into community.

“Acquaint thyself at first hand with deity!” Emerson told his audience – the most famous words from his speech. And to an extent Paul would agree with him, as they both value divine revelation so highly. But the whole problem with this advice is that leaves it to us to do precisely the thing we are unable to do. The apostle Paul became acquainted with God not because he found Christ but because Christ found him! Paul had an experience of the risen Christ – a divine revelation – without his doing anything to create or seek it. Paul describes this revelation as being so far from his ability to direct it that even before Paul was born, God had begun planning to reveal Christ to Paul in this way and call him to spread the gospel. Paul has authority to proclaim the good news because he has not only heard reports about it from others but he has also experienced and received this gospel himself, quite apart from his own doing.

We have words and traditions with which we communicate our faith, but that is not all we have. We also have the Word, made flesh in Jesus Christ, and revealed to us in the sacraments. When we gather for worship together, we don't only have words about baptism, we also have water that helps us remember our own baptism and how it connects us into the body of Christ. We have the gifts of God, given to us in baptism -- forgiveness and new life -- revealed to us anew at the beginning of each worship service. When we gather around this table, we don't only use words to tell a story about a meal Jesus shared with his friends (words Paul handed down to the Corinthians as he had received them from others); we too experience Jesus sharing this meal with us. In the sacraments, we taste and touch and hear and see that the Lord is good. Christ is revealed to us in word and water, bread and wine. This is done “for you,” given “for you,” and for all. This good news is revealed for you, and in you, and through you and us for the sake of the world God loves. This gospel reveals God among us when we gather, and then sends us out, not only to tell the good news but to be the good news, to live the good news, so that others may see Christ, embodied and revealed for them too. Thanks be to God! Amen.