

When the leaders in Jerusalem saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised<sup>8</sup> (for he who worked through Peter making him an apostle to the circumcised also worked through me in sending me to the Gentiles),<sup>9</sup> and when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.<sup>10</sup> They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.

<sup>11</sup>But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; <sup>12</sup>for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. <sup>13</sup>And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. <sup>14</sup>But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

<sup>15</sup>We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; <sup>16</sup>yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. <sup>17</sup>But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! <sup>18</sup>But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. <sup>19</sup>For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; <sup>20</sup>and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. <sup>21</sup>I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

Yesterday, June 11, was a significant day for our congregation because in the church calendar of commemorations, June 11 is the commemoration day for Barnabas, the apostle for whom we are named. I haven't talked about Barnabas for a while, so I'd like to begin by briefly refreshing your memory about Barnabas, or perhaps introduce him to you for the first time.

"Barnabas" is actually a nickname. A native of the island of Cyprus, his given name was Joseph, but his Christian friends called him Barnabas, meaning "son of encouragement", because of his boldness in sharing the story of Christ with others. That's one of the ways Barnabas provides an example for our congregation to emulate. Wouldn't it be great if our congregation had that same reputation for boldly living and sharing the gospel!

There's a brief story about Barnabas in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts where, when the infant Christian community was in need of funds to keep its ministries going, Barnabas sold a field that he owned and gave the proceeds to the church. Barnabas understood the concept of Christian stewardship, realizing the truth that nothing that we "own" is really ours. Instead, everything we have ultimately belongs to God, and we are given the responsibility to be "stewards," or managers, of it on God's behalf. By selling his field and sharing the proceeds with others, Barnabas backed up his bold words with actions, setting an example that the Christian faith affects all areas of our lives – our selves, our time, and our possessions, as one of our offertory prayers states. Again, wouldn't it be great if this St. Barnabas had that same reputation for generous stewardship!

Perhaps Barnabas' most important act of leadership is recounted in Acts 9. He was in Jerusalem when Paul showed up and told the Christian community of his conversion experience on the road to Damascus. Up to this point, Paul had led the persecution of Christians, arresting many of them. The Christian community was understandably skeptical of Paul's conversion story, thinking this was a ruse to infiltrate the community, identify all its members, and then arrest them all at once. But Barnabas discerned that Paul's faith was genuine and advocated that Paul be welcomed into the community. This event is depicted in the wood sculpture that hangs on the wall in our narthex. This event changed the course of the history of the Christian church, for if Barnabas had not advocated for Paul, Paul may have never been recognized as an apostle and the church would have not included Paul's letters in the New Testament.

It is just by coincidence that our reading from Galatians this morning mentions Barnabas. But in this reading, Barnabas does not set such a good example. He reveals that even the most dedicated of Christians is at the same time a human being, always subject to the foibles, anxieties, and weaknesses of being human.

Let me briefly recap what's at stake in this letter to the Galatians. Paul, the writer of the letter, had been the "pastor/developer" of several mission congregations in the province of Galatia, in present-day Turkey. Some time after leaving Galatia, Paul learned that other Christian missionaries had come and convinced the Galatians that to be a true Christian, one must first, in effect, become a Jew. That is, one must obey the Torah, the collection of laws in the Old Testament, including circumcision for males and the dietary laws that prohibit eating with non-Jews, or Gentiles.

Paul writes this letter to vigorously assert his understanding of the gospel, that there are no preconditions that must be met in order to be a Christian. Our relationship with God is based on what God has done for us in Christ, rather than on what we eat, or with whom we eat, or what kinds of spiritual experiences we've had, or our social status, or the color of our skin, or any other criteria we might come up with.

In this passage, Paul is critical of Barnabas and Peter (here Peter is referred to by his Hebrew name, Cephas) for being inconsistent in applying this great truth of the gospel. The three of them had once been together in Antioch, a city on the northeast corner of the Mediterranean Sea, not too far from present-day Beirut, Lebanon. Paul, Barnabas, and Peter all shared their meals with the Gentile Christians in the community without any misgivings. But then some men came from Jerusalem – Paul calls them members of the circumcision faction – and Peter and Barnabas suddenly stopped eating with the Gentiles.

At first glance, it would seem that Peter and Barnabas are being two-faced – modifying their actions in order to please whomever they happen to be with. There may be something more involved here, however. Perhaps Peter and Barnabas are not being fickle. Some scholars believe that the message these “advocates of circumcision” carried was this:

There was at that time in the early 50’s a lot of nationalistic fervor among some of the Jews in Jerusalem. They were tired of being ruled by the Romans and they wanted to establish their own Jewish state. It’s possible that the men who came to Antioch, the men Paul says Peter and Barnabas “feared”, were not members of the Christian church, but zealous Jews who were pressuring Jewish Christians in Jerusalem to not associate with Gentiles because it was unpatriotic. They had heard of Peter’s liberal relationship with the Gentiles in Antioch and had come to warn him, perhaps even threaten him, that his actions might have serious repercussions for his Christian friends in Jerusalem. In effect, Peter and Barnabas may have been confronted with a terroristic threat – cease your relationship with the Gentiles or your friends in Jerusalem are going to suffer. If that was indeed the choice they faced, Peter and Barnabas decided it was more important to protect their friends than to worry about with whom they were eating.

This month is the 27<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the protests that took place in Tiananmen Square in Beijing and the severe repression that followed. We might compare Barnabas and Peter’s situation to that of a Chinese student who was studying here in America during that time. She had been very vocal in her support of the democracy movement in Beijing when it began and was widely quoted in the American press. But once the crackdown started, others warned her that if she continued to be outspoken, the Chinese government might hear of it and imprison or even kill her family. She was confronted with the dilemma of whether to speak the truth or to remain silent to protect her family.

If this explanation of the situation in Antioch is correct, we can better understand Barnabas’ and Peter’s actions. Their decision to withdraw from eating with Gentiles was based on a concern for the unity and peace of the church, at least the unity and peace of the Antioch and Jerusalem congregations.

Whatever the specifics of the situation were, Paul definitely believes that Peter and Barnabas made the wrong choice. Paul is concerned that, even if their actions were well-intended, they were not realizing the full impact of their actions. By ceasing to eat with the Gentiles, they were signaling that the Gentiles are second-class Christians. Their actions were saying to the Gentiles, “You can be part of the church with us only if you follow the Jewish laws.” They were setting up pre-requisites for membership in the body of Christ.

So Paul said to Peter and Barnabas, “You can’t do that. You can not compromise the gospel and make it into something we achieve by our actions. Our relationship with God is a freely given gift. If that were not so, then Christ died on the cross for no purpose.”

This nearly 2,000-year-old argument from Antioch still goes on in the church today. We are always tempted to add something to the gospel to make it the “true and complete” gospel. For the Galatians it was the temptation to add obedience to the Old Testament laws. For us the temptation comes in a variety of forms. We are tempted to insist that “genuine” Christians (like me and those who agree with me) have the “correct” understanding of styles of worship, abortion, immigration laws, gun control, taxes, the most effective response to ISIS, and so on. It concerns me that more and more I see people choosing which congregation to join based not on whether that congregation welcomes all people based on the gospel good news that God has acted for us in Jesus Christ, but based on where they find a group of people who agree with them on social and political issues that have little to do with the gospel of Jesus.

Paul is adamant in this second chapter of Galatians that nothing, absolutely nothing, can be added to the gospel – a person is justified (put in a right relationship with God) not by works of the law (not by anything we do) but only through trust in Jesus Christ. Period. The unity of the church is not based on all of us being the same, but is based solely on what God has done for us in Christ.

If you’re like me, this radical statement of God’s grace may be making you a little uncomfortable. Doesn’t it matter what we do? Aren’t there certain moral standards that are expected of Christians? Paul says that when Peter, James, and John gave him their blessing to share the gospel with the Gentiles, the only requirement they made was that he remember the poor. Is that the only ethical standard for Christians – remember the poor?

Paul has spoken decisively here in proclaiming the gospel, but the letter does not end here. There are four chapters to go, so you’ll have to come back again next week.