

“A Blazing Grace” GPPC 5-29-16
Psalm 96, Galatians 1:1-12

This is not a news flash. We live in a culture and in a country that moves very quickly to anger. Road rage. Violent protests. Bullying in the schools. Domestic violence. Hateful rhetoric on the Internet and in the newspaper.

There is even anger in Christ’s church. People latch onto a small slight, a trivial offense, a tiny disagreement and they become not merely irritated but furious. Sometimes they cross their arms, purse their lips, and seethe in silence. “Are you okay?” “Fine.” “Are you sure?” “Yes.” Other times folks unleash their anger in spoken words or emails or letters. Sometimes they abandon faith communities they’ve cherished and have cherished them for years or even decades. It’s sad. One Bible scholar says the church’s “biggest problem of all [is] pettiness.” (Fred B. Craddock, *Philippians*, 43.) Church folks get caught up in pettiness and that leads to inappropriate anger. And that’s so destructive to the faith community.

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An early church father said, “If it is true that the Holy Spirit is peace of soul...and if anger is disturbance of the heart...then there is no greater obstacle to the presence of the Spirit in us than anger.” (John Climacus quoted by Kathleen Norris, *Dakota*, 137.) Jesus said, “If you are angry with your brother or sister you are liable to judgment.” (Matthew 5:22) Wow! This is a challenging command for us, isn't it? Could we pray for God to make us more patient and forgiving?

Yes, there *are* times when anger is justified and even needed, (as we shall see). But watch out for anger. It is dangerous.

The Apostle Paul knows that, no doubt. And that's what makes his letter to the Galatian church even more striking.

As you may know, normally Paul begins his letters to the New Testament churches with a greeting and then with a lengthy and sometimes gushing thanksgiving for the church he's writing to. Here's how he begins the first six verses in his letter to the Philippian church. He writes, “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank

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my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 1:1-6)

Beautiful, isn't it? And remember Paul writes these words to the Philippian church from his prison cell. And his thanksgiving for this church continues for another five verses. Paul's gratitude for the Philippian church overflows, splashing onto the pages of scripture.

But then notice how he writes to the Galatian church in his verses. “Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—and all the members of God's family who are with me...”

Well, this has all the charm of a summons from the sheriff's department. All the tenderness of a letter from a collection agency. Paul is angry, very angry. So he begins his letter by reminding the church of

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his authority and his credentials. “I’m an apostle, not commissioned or sent by human beings but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead, and, by the way, *all* the members of God’s family who are with me...” “Those are *my* credentials,” says Paul. “What do you got?”

And then almost immediately Paul continues the attack. “I’m astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel...If anybody is proclaiming a gospel contrary to the one I proclaimed to you, let that person be accursed...Am I trying to get the approval of people, trying to flatter people? No. I’m a servant of Christ and I received my message not from human beings but through a revelation from Jesus Christ.”

And after these comments, the session of the Galatian church asked that Paul’s sabbatical be moved up a year.

Another Presbyterian pastor says, “Today people are fundamentally consumers: they want what they want when they want it,

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even in the church. If they do not like what is happening or what they hear, they leave and start shopping for a better deal. Meanwhile, the pressure is constantly on preachers to increase attendance, to raise the budget, to grow a church—to do whatever it takes to improve market share. Be nice; be funny; make promises; do not offend. There is an inordinate desire for approval, for applause, for appreciation on the part of pastors today. To Paul's questions, 'Am I seeking human approval,...am I trying to please people?' (v.10), many preachers today would have to answer, in all honesty, yes... [But] what is sacrificed is the ability to be a slave of Christ in service to his unchanging gospel."

(Heidi Husted Armstrong in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 3, 90.*)

Paul refuses to get sucked into the vortex of being a "people pleaser" instead of a God pleaser. But what in the world is he so upset about? Of all things, Paul is upset about circumcision. Circumcision. It seems like such a small thing—figuratively and literally, doesn't it? But it isn't.

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Here's what has happened. Paul had visited the Galatian church some time before, been warmly welcomed, and had his preaching well-received. He had left to continue his ministry elsewhere. And after he left, a group of missionaries, we don't know exactly who they were, came and preached a different message, a message so wrong that Paul calls it "accursed" (the Greek word is *anathema*). As the old pastor in one of Marilynne Robinson's novels laments, "You can spend forty years teaching people to be awake to the fact of mystery and then some fellow with no more theological sense than a jackrabbit gets himself a radio ministry and all your work is forgotten." (Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*, 208.)

A group of missionaries has come and preached a new message and the true gospel is forgotten. What's their new message? One scholar describes it this way, "In addition to preaching Christ, they urged that the predominantly Gentile congregations adopt the Jewish practice of circumcision in order to secure themselves a place among the people of God. Thereby the Christian experience could be brought to perfection." (Charles B. Cousar, *Galatians*, 4.)

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Do you see what an unmitigated disaster this is? Listen to these missionaries talk to the Galatians.

“You see, friends, you almost had this gospel thing right. Yes, Christ gave himself for your sins. That’s all well and good, but it’s just not quite enough. What’s needed for you to be forgiven and loved by God is *more* than simply God’s grace. What’s needed from you is just to do a little extra, and then you’ll have ‘the full’ good news. What’s required is some work on your part.”

Imagine where this new message leads. Now that we’ve added one extra bit of our following the law, what’s to stop us from adding more for good measure? And if my relationship with God depends upon my following the law, before you know it, I am stuck with a scared and frantic life always feeling that I just haven’t done enough. Almost good enough, but not quite.

On the other hand, maybe some of us would think, “By gosh, I *have* done enough. In fact, I’ve earned God’s love, and I am so proud of it. It’s really sort of a business relationship, you know. God made me to

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produce a product, a good life for God. And that's what I do. This whole death and resurrection of Jesus thing is unnecessary. I don't know why God bothered."

Do you see how utterly destructive this one seemingly insignificant issue is? If we have to keep one part of the law in order to be in God's good graces, then we have to keep the whole thing. And if we have to keep the whole thing, then we're stuck with anxious, frazzled lives or with self-deceived arrogance. This is why when Paul sings his angry anthem to the Galatians, in his furious voice, Amazing Grace becomes A Blazing Grace.

Instead of the false gospel Paul preaches the real gospel. As he says, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age..." Because of God's absolutely unearned gift, we are set free. We don't have to try to live good lives to get God to love us. We try to live good lives because God *already* loves us. We don't worship God because we have to. We worship God because we are allowed to; it's a

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privilege. Because of the gospel, everything in our life with God shifts from grim obligation to joyous thanksgiving. We live good lives not from fear, not from harsh duty but from thanksgiving, and wanting to share in what God is doing in the world. But we are accepted as we are. So we respond with gratitude and joy and love.

Seminary professor David Bartlett says, “I was watching a British video on finding more effective ways to communicate with autistic children. The reporter was interviewing the father of an autistic son, a British construction worker...The father was talking about much his son felt cut off, estranged, alienated, disconnected. ‘What is it you would wish for your son?’ the reporter asked. The father could hardly speak. Then finally, ‘I just want him to be accepted.’” (David L. Bartlett, *What’s Good about This News: Preaching from the Gospels and Galatians*, 17.)

And so we are accepted. Just as we are. Brought back into relationship with God to live in freedom and gladness and peace. Blazing and amazing, we call it grace. Grace. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal