

Renewing the Covenant
Galatians 4: 4-7, 5: 1, 5, 13-14
Saugatuck Congregational Church

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Second Sunday in Christmas

The Lesson for today is from Paul's Letter to the church at Galatia. It's an impassioned letter to the church that he had founded, exhorting them to stand firm on the principle of salvation by grace alone. This scripture is traditional for New Year's. To sense the amazing power of these words, imagine yourself a slave on New Year's Eve 1862. You have heard rumors of the Emancipation Proclamation, and you are hoping they are true, but afraid they aren't. Through the long night, passing from 1862 to 1863, and into the day, slaves gathered in worship and prayed. As they waited and watched they heard again the Biblical story of our God who calls us from slavery to freedom, from death to Life. Imagine them hearing these words from Paul, radical words, powerful words.

When the designated time had come, God sent forth his Son born of a woman, born under the law, to deliver from the law those who were subjected to it, so that we might receive our status as adopted sons and daughters. The proof that you are sons and daughters is the fact that God has sent forth into our hearts the spirit of his Son which cries out "Abba!" ("Father!") You are no longer a slave but a son! (no longer a slave but a daughter!) And the fact that you are a son (or daughter) makes you an heir, by God's design. For Freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery. For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly await the hope of righteousness. For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; Only do not use freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love, become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."
Galatians 4: 4-7, 5: 1, 5, 13-14

We can imagine the power of these words to slaves. This scripture must have vibrated with promise on the eve of emancipation. I imagine it being almost screamed as people clapped and shouted "Alleluia!" and "Amen!" I can imagine the pandemonium that broke loose when a runner finally brought the news that the longed for words were signed into law:

On the 1st day of January, in the year of Our Lord 1863, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.

Amazing grace! A scripture tangibly fulfilled. But what is the power in Paul's words for us? From what are we set free? Or need to be? Where is the joy of emancipation to be found in our lives?

These words of Paul's weren't written first to slaves, but to Gentiles who had converted to Christianity through Paul's preaching in Galatia. Paul had founded the church and stayed to get them well begun, and then gone on. Meanwhile, there was a struggle within the church about what it means to be a Christian— and it's never stopped, has it? It's a central theological issue for every generation— but this is the first generation church and the arguments are hot and the people confused. What is the church meant to be?

In Paul's absence, people Paul calls "agitators" have come. Like Paul, they are Jewish-Christians; but unlike Paul, they believe that the Gentiles, having accepted Christ, must now be circumcised and observe the Sabbath and Holy Days and follow Jewish law. And "they claimed to represent more faithfully than Paul the teachings of the 'Mother Church' in Jerusalem."¹ And many of the Galatian Christians are persuaded: there's security in knowing just what you have to do to please God and be saved.

When Paul hears of it, he is furious! This is an impassioned letter; the whole Gospel Paul preached is at stake. If conditions are attached to grace, it is not grace. Paul argues that if circumcision and observance of the Law are necessary to be part of the church, then it implies God's grace is not sufficient. Paul practically shouts from the page: it is the power of God at work in the cross of Jesus, not anything we do, or fail to do, that puts us in right relationship with God. The agitators, Paul says, diminish the saving power of Christ. For Paul, the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ radically changed the world, and the lives of all who believed. And he preached and pleaded for the church not to fall into the false security of salvation by following the rules.

For Paul, all: Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, are lost to the power of sin without God's grace. Nothing we have done, or can ever do; but only Christ's life and death and resurrection can free us to become Children of God- any of us. It is in the nature of grace that it is given: it can't be earned, or it isn't grace. And grace can't be humanly limited: it can't be defined away, or denied to some. "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8): and that's enough: there is nothing we have to prove or accomplish. Not as strangers, not as slaves, not as outsiders longing to get in; but as sons and daughters, we are in, already, and beloved, and honored and accepted and provided for.

Our life with God is not meant to be effortful; it is not a list of oughts and shoulds. Our life with God is a gift, it opens possibilities that otherwise would never be. God makes faithfulness possible. We are here by grace, helped by grace, connected to one another by grace, forgiven by grace .It is not our doing. And no one can take grace from us. There are no expectations we have to meet.

For me, marriage, my marriage, is a metaphor for grace. In my marriage, there are no "to do" lists. There is only our love for each other that determines who we are, and how we are, and what we do. I have a cleaning service at home now. Does that mean I'm not as good a wife? Of course not: --now, I do this--- and they do that; and it doesn't touch my love for my husband, or his for me, which doesn't lie in what we do. And only our love makes our lives together possible: if we didn't love each other, I don't think we would be able to get through the hard times. If we didn't love each other, much that is a joy, would be an impossible burden.

And it is like that with God. Only grace makes faith possible, not only possible, but joyful, natural, expanding, full of peace. Grace is -- grace.

¹New Interpreter's Bible XI, p. 185-186

There is a poem by e.e. cummings I love. It's how I think of my husband. It's how I think of God. It's how I think of you.

*i am so glad and very
merely my fourth will cure
the laziest sea of weary
the hugest sea of shore*

*so far your nearness reaches
a lucky fifth of you
turns people into eaches
and cowards into grow*

*our can'ts were made to happen
our mosts have died in more
our twentieth will open
wide a wide open door*

*we are so both and oneful
night cannot be so sky
sky cannot be so sunful
i am through you so i
e.e. cummings*

I am through you so I. That's how it is with love. God's love makes possible our love for God, and in that love we grow into ourselves. God's love draws us together and makes us one, as marriage forms new kinship systems and brings around the table people you would otherwise not know at all, but who are now your family.

I am one of the lucky ones, I know, and not just in my husband, although that too. I grew up secure in the knowledge that God loved me: the first Bible verse I ever memorized was "God is love." I can remember back to when I was three, but I can't remember back far enough to remember a time I didn't know that. I grew up knowing that I was a child of God. I grew up singing my faith,

*My Father is rich in houses and lands,
He holdth the wealth of the world in His hands!
Of rubies and diamonds, of silver and gold,
His coffers are full, He has riches untold.*

*I'm a child of the King,
A child of the King:
With Jesus my Savior,
I'm a child of the King.*

*I've been adopted, my name's written down,
An heir to a mansion, a robe and a crown.
A tent or a cottage, why should I care?
They're building a palace for me over there;
Though exiled from home, yet still may I sing:
All glory to God, I'm a child of the King.
With Jesus my Savior, I'm a child of the King.*

Words: Harriet E. Buell, 1877

You may disparage it if you want to as pie in the sky, hopelessly naive, theologically unsophisticated, quaint. But you can perhaps imagine what it meant to a child who was under-parented, to put it gently, and sometimes so poor it would make you weep to hear the tales I have to tell. Knowing that I was a child of God, made all the difference. There is no explaining the joy in my heart, apart from grace. It was joy that was not dependant

on externals, a fruit of the Holy Spirit that God just gave to me. God freed me from hopelessness and despair.

And you? How has God set you free? Or are you still entangled in self-sufficiency? It's so easy to think that with enough effort, we can change anything, especially ourselves. And we almost instinctively make faith effortful; we put conditions on it and make requirements; like Paul's antagonists.

But the Gospel is, all those who are in Christ are now and shall be forever free. You are free. You are loved, a child, not a slave. It's as good news for us as it was to those slaves watching for the good news..

And it took a long time for the news to get to some of them. You may have heard of Juneteenth Day, a celebration in the African American Community, on June 19th. That's the day the conspiracy of silence in Texas about the emancipation of the slaves was finally broken and slaves there heard that good news for the first time, almost six months after the fact, that they were free. They were free, They were all free. Some just didn't know it yet. There was nothing they had to do. They were free, by the proclamation of Abraham Lincoln and the new law of the land. But their lives hadn't yet changed.

That's how it is with us. We are free by God's grace in the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. We are loved. We are children of God, not slaves but sons and daughters. Just, some of us may not know it yet. But it is so, all the same.

As children of God, beloved heirs of the kingdom, we gather here around Christ's table, and we tell the family stories, and sing the family songs. There is nothing we have to do. Nothing we have to know. Nothing we have to earn. We just get together and reminisce about who we are, and how we got here.

In my church family of origin, the Methodist Church, my New Year's traditions were rooted in a Watch Night Service on New Year's Eve. We gathered for a pot-luck dinner and games and then at 11 we went into the sanctuary, so mysterious with all the stained glass windows dark, and renewed the covenant that we had made with God. We used the Covenant Prayer of John Wesley, and it made a big impression on me. I prayed it with all my heart, and the spirituality that it taught has helped me all my life and I share it in part with you:

The minister, who was my father, said: "In sincere dependence on God's grace and trusting in God's promises, let us give ourselves anew to God, meekly kneeling." Then we all knelt and prayed: I can hear in my mind our voices in unison but distinct, my mother's voice, and my brothers', one on either side of me, and my small earnest voice,

I am no longer my own, but yours. Put me to what you will, set me with whom you will; put me to doing, put me to suffering, let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you, exalted for you or brought low for you; let me be full, let me be empty; let me have all things, let me have nothing; I freely and heartily yield all things to your pleasure and disposal: And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours. So be it. And let the covenant that I have made on earth be ratified in heaven. Amen.

It was a sacred moment in my life, each year. It shaped the person I have become. Repeating the covenant helped me live into it.

So I invite you to live into our Saugatuck Church covenant. I have printed it out in full, but we will read together only the first part. But I wanted you to have it all, because it is our covenant. It's an important part of our family story, it grows out of our history, and I hope you'll read it and pray it at home, not dutifully, but with joy that God has called us to be this church together, and that it is not our own earnest effort, but Christ who strengthens us who gives us the power to do all these things.

At the start of this new year, as members together, let us stand and renew our covenant.

The Covenant of Saugatuck Congregational Church

We the members of Saugatuck Congregational Church acknowledge and celebrate the tangible presence of God in our lives as revealed in Jesus Christ. We recognize that loving faithfulness to God is best manifested in our loving faithfulness to one another and our earth. Therefore, we covenant with God and each other to strive to follow Christ's way, walking with our brothers and sisters in faithfulness to Christ's command to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. We accept as our responsibility the worship of God, the witness and fellowship of this faith community and the task of life-long education in the faith. We claim as our mission the promotion of justice, peace and human dignity in both word and deed. In all these things we bind ourselves to follow the Holy Spirit as revealed in the scriptures, in tradition and in our own experience. Amen.

May this covenant that we have made on earth be ratified in heaven so that by God's grace we may be, become and do what God intends for us.

Let the people say "Amen."