

## **ELCA Churchwide Assembly Bible Study**

**Wednesday, August 8**

**The Rev. David L. Tiede - Galatians 1:1-10**

I greet you with the Apostle Paul's salutation to the churches in Galatia:

“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, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory for ever and ever, AMEN!

And what is the will of our God and Father for us?

And what about our sexuality? Where does all of that fit in?

Whether or not you think the present age is “evil,” you know how people disagree about sex, gender, and reproduction. How in heaven's Name are we as a church going to develop and adopt a “social statement” on sexuality in the midst of disputes about what is moral or just? If it's all just sexual politics, as the media suspect, our congregations and our families are split. Sex is harder to discuss than money. Why bother? Where's the hope?

But heaven's Name is just the point. We are not going to rush to our own judgments, pressing for decisions, voting on issues that distress and divide us. First we will dwell in God's word, welcoming the saving presence of Christ Jesus, seeking to discern the Holy Spirit's gift and wisdom.

So we are asking our congregations and assemblies throughout the ELCA to let the word of Christ dwell in us deeply, focusing on Paul's letter to the Galatians. Galatians is the epistle text for this Pentecost season. Thousands of congregations have already heard portions. Some Bible studies have begun, using the resource of *Free in Christ to Serve the Neighbor*.

This churchwide gathering is a church assembly. We are church here. Yes, we debate and legislate, doing the political work of the denomination. But we also sing, pray, hear preaching, receive the Lord's Supper, and yesterday we heard the whole of Paul's letter recited, much as the earliest Jesus communities in Asia Minor heard it. They didn't cut it into little pieces arguing about each detail as if Paul wrote case law. At least at first, it came at them like a rushing wind, filled with the promises and commands of God.

Those Jesus communities were in a deep quandary. They had trusted the strong mercy of the Gospel, gathering them to God just as they were. They didn't even keep the laws God gave to Israel. Now some Christians were insisting that these non-Israelites get kosher with God. The Gospel is good, but circumcision and food rituals were also essential. After all, they said, Jesus is the Messiah God promised to Israel. So get with the program!

Sounds reasonable! And policies and social statements are programs. Of course they are. All programs are requirements, laws, rules or procedures on how to get it right. It's good to get it right. Without laws society is chaos. The Apostle Paul agrees God gave us rules for our own good.

But God gave us Jesus to set us free and to save us from ourselves. Hard we try, we are stuck. Righteously, religiously keeping the rules, we are trying to make it on our own, and then we want everybody else to be like us. Our show tune could be, "There's no righteousness like self-righteousness!" And that includes our sexual righteousness, by the way! "Why can't a woman be more like a man?" chortles Henry Higgins. Or "Why can't you get this sexual-gender thing straight, like I have it figured out?"

"Who will save us from this body of death?" Paul asks elsewhere.

Listen, there is nobody here today except forgiven sinners. As you hear the Apostle rip into the people who thought they were righteous, relax.

So what if your politics are conservative or liberal? Maybe you are an adamant advocate for the justice of sexual inclusivity or a fierce defender of moral purity. You may well be right! Maybe you will learn from each other. But most importantly, your righteousness before God didn't come from you.

Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia is a risky, powerful testimony. Martin Luther's dynamic commentaries on Galatians were denounced by the official teachers in Rome as "anti-nomian" or denying God's law. One of the reasons you need to hear or read the whole letter is that Paul first attacks those who turn Christian freedom into a new law, then concludes, "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another." Hang in for chapters 5 and 6, friends. Christian freedom is not just freedom from, but freedom for ... freedom to be a blessing to the neighbor. Even our sexuality is a way to make the world a more trustworthy place.

But we begin in chapter 1 where the Apostle is taking on those who insist on their program, requiring obedience to the rules instead of trusting the freedom of God's Gospel. We are asking you and people throughout the church first not to examine printed texts and not to argue about translations. Listening with the heart is a discipline of letting go and letting God.

As you listen to this passage, keep at least two things in mind.

1. *Alarm can sound like anger.* Paul's letter is direct, even fierce, but this is the cry of alarm of a parent whose child has run into the street: "Get back, right now!" Paul often calls God "Father," even "our Father," and shows his own tender maternal care. "My little children," he says, "for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth, until Christ is formed in you." Listen for Paul's love and care in his alarm.

2. *Serving Christ means loving our neighbor.*

It isn't about pleasing everybody, even people in authority. Once we know that our righteousness and our holiness come from Christ Jesus alone, we are free to do the hard work together of determining what will truly help our neighbor, especially our vulnerable neighbor. Galatians isn't about sex. Listen for how welcoming God's mercy in our lives means living for others in the promise, including our sexual lives.

A reading from the first chapter of Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia. May the word of God dwell in you richly.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Galatians 1:1** 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--  
<sup>2</sup> and all the members of God's family who are with me, To the churches of Galatia:  
<sup>3</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,  
<sup>4</sup> who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father,  
<sup>5</sup> to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.  
<sup>6</sup> I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel--  
<sup>7</sup> not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.  
<sup>8</sup> But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!  
<sup>9</sup> As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!  
<sup>10</sup> Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

Questions to be posted on the screen to aid discernment:

1. How could the Galatians have received comfort from Paul's fierce words in this opening section?
2. What is the difference between being a people pleaser and a servant of Christ?