

If we do not give up

Gal. 6:1-10

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Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia was written to a Church still in formation, a church that was still trying to figure out who they were and what was required of someone, to be a Christian, a faithful follower of Christ. You know, sort of like.... today.

The letter was written to a very early church, probably no more than 20 years after the crucifixion. The church was still considered largely a Jewish movement at that time and many in the church still considered themselves fully Jewish and still subject to the traditional practices and expectations that they, as faithful Jews, had always observed and honored.

But then there were those pesky Gentile converts who Paul kept bringing into the church and although they were no doubt, good people and seemed to genuinely believe in and commit to following the way of Jesus, they had no real sense of tradition, they just didn't understand how things are supposed to be done.

So, much to Paul's consternation, there was division and conflict within the church. They didn't agree on what was important. You know, sort of like.... well like always, I suppose. And so, Paul, with a bit of a broken heart I would think, writes the church a letter, a letter that I, with a bit of a broken heart as well, find all too timely and relevant to us here in the church today.

And when I say "us," I don't mean just us here in this church, although admittedly we can and do have our own issues from time to time. But I mean the big church, the whole church, the capital C church, "the Holy Catholic Church" we say in our creed, the conglomeration of all those denominations and congregations who profess a faith in Christ and a desire to live a Christ-like life.

I have been involved in church in some shape or fashion for most of my life and it seems to me that there has never been a time, in my lifetime at least, in which fellow Christians hold more divergent beliefs about what it means to be a Christian than now.

There are certain hot button issues and the side you take on these (and there are definitely “sides”) determines whether or not you are a “real” Christian. And for the first time that I can remember, for many, one of the criteria that determines whether or not you are a “real” Christian is which political party you support.

But it’s not just in the church of course. It seems everywhere we turn these days there are those seeking to divide us and turn us against one another and succeeding. It’s enough to make a person grow weary indeed for there is much in the world to be troubled about.

And I must admit that it is one of my deepest struggles right now: to not grow weary and to not just stop trying, to not just give up. For it often feels that whatever bit of good I can do, whatever act of kindness I can offer, whatever love I can share is rendered insignificant in the face of all that opposes it.

And I am not the only one that feels this way I am sure, for it seems that nearly everyone I talk with these days is either angry or dispirited...or both. An old friend shared with me just a few days ago that she was feeling both angry and brokenhearted.

But of course, it is not a new story. It is at least as old as the church in Galatia and in reality, of course, much older than that. At the risk of sounding like an old blues song, hard times just keep on coming around and finding a way to keep our chin up and keep on keeping on is just a part of life it seems. But it is still hard, and it seems especially hard right now.

But I find deep wisdom in the words of Paul to the church back then and it seems to me that they can offer a bit of help and a measure of comfort to us still now. At least they do to me.

Paul begins by addressing the people as friends. Not a bad place to start don’t you think. I suspect he was more than a little put out with them really, but he still considered them friends. There is not much room for movement when we are dealing with enemies.

But we are in different territory when we are dealing with friends. And perhaps most importantly, when we are among friends we are in community, and we have a reason to work things out.

Then Paul says that even with those friends we might see as on the wrong side of things, those who are “detected in a transgression” as he calls it, the objective should be to restore. I don’t know about you, but the ugly truth is that I can move fairly quickly to a desire for punishment or at least righteous condemnation. But Paul says our goal should be restoration, for healing, for wholeness for all. When our work is for restoration you see, in the depths of our hearts we wish each other well.

And we should treat each other, Paul says, in a “spirit of gentleness”—not enough of that going around these days: gentleness, kindness, forgiveness, patience. And we should strive to “bear one another’s burdens” for we all have them and none of us fully knows what hurts and troubles we each carry. When we reach out with compassion and understanding and help to bear each other’s struggles and pain, it becomes the fulfillment of the law and the love of Christ.

And then in the spirit of Jesus’ admonition to “remove the log from our own eye” so that we can see more clearly to “remove the speck” from someone else’s, Paul invites us to begin by first taking an honest look at our own stuff in our own backyard before judging what our neighbor is doing. Personally, I don’t like that part.

Paul then throws in a bit of justice here as he cautions us to “not be deceived” for God will not be mocked and we each WILL reap whatever we sow. But he offers this truth not so much as a threat, I think, but as an invitation, an invitation to sow good things, eternal things, sow to the Spirit he says, so that when harvest time comes (and it will come) the harvest will be good and abundant. And whatever bit of goodness and kindness we sow, whatever bit of love and beauty we plant then the more goodness and kindness and love and beauty there will be.

I think it is important to notice the metaphor that Paul is using here. He is not talking about depositing or storing up good things in some treasure chest somewhere. No, he is talking about sowing, planting things, and things that are sown and planted grow. They multiply, they become more, they bear fruit. What may seem so tiny and unimpressive when it is planted becomes something filling, nourishing, essential.

Yes, harvest time will come and what we sow will make a difference, but harvest time is in God's time and God plays the long game. And so, Paul encourages us to not grow weary and to have faith in the harvest and in the one who harvests. To think like a farmer, one who knows that even before the fruit appears, even before the first shoot becomes visible, stuff is already happening down deep—good stuff, essential stuff, root stuff.

In a sense Paul is encouraging us to be patient but not just patiently waiting but rather, patiently doing what is right. "Whenever we have an opportunity" Paul writes, "let us work for the good of all." God is the one who harvests but we are the ones who sow. So as faithful people we cannot, we must not give up. As hard as it is to not grow weary, as faithful people, as the ones who's task it is to sow, we cannot, we must not give up.

I don't think that Paul is telling us to just look on the bright side here and remain optimistic. I think Paul is talking more about hope here than mere optimism. And there is an important difference between the two. For optimism, like happiness you see is dependent upon the circumstances out there, the facts on the ground so to speak. But hope, hope like joy is dependent upon the circumstances in here, the condition of our own heart and soul.

And we as Christians, as followers of Christ, have a deep and special kind of hope for it is hope that springs from a promise—a promise that the God who came and dwelt among us will come again and is somehow with us still. The promise that our prayer will be answered, and God's kingdom WILL come, and God's will WILL be done on earth, this very earth, as it is in heaven.

Poet Clarissa Pinkola Estés says it better than I can.

Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, she says, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach. Any small, calm thing that one soul can do to help another soul, to assist some portion of this poor suffering world, will help immensely. It is not given to us to know which acts or by whom, will cause the critical mass to tip toward an enduring good.

There will always be times when you feel discouraged. I too have felt despair many times in my life, but I do not keep a chair for it. I will not entertain it. It is not allowed to eat from my plate.

The reason is this: In my uttermost bones I know something, as do you. It is that there can be no despair when you remember why you came to this Earth, who you serve, and who sent you here. The good words we say and the good deeds we do are not ours. They are the words and deeds of the One who brought us here. In that spirit, I hope you will write this on your wall: When a great ship is in harbor and moored, it is safe, there can be no doubt. But that is not what great ships are built for.”

In the name of the one who gave the promise, fulfilled the promise and is the promise, amen.