

June 20, 2010

Pentecost IV, Proper 7, Year C

1 Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a

Galatians 3:23-29

Luke 8:26-39

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I recall a summer vacation trip when I was about twelve, give or take a year or two, my early adolescence. One night in the wee hours, probably about 1:00 a.m., loud, adult voices, mostly male, came through the window and woke me up. I tried to go back to sleep, but couldn't, and I started to listen to their boisterous and cheerful conversation. It shocked me. They were discussing what percentage of the time they thought about sex.

Like most twelve year olds, I recognized that sex and sexuality were tricky subjects to talk about, that it often made people twitchy and nervous, and that people often had a hard time being candid about it. I, of course, was curious and thought I might overhear some helpful information. I now recognize that a drink or two probably had fueled the discussion, as well as the typical male preening and boasting. Its reliability may have been suspect, but I listened carefully. The answers of my nocturnal focus group, at least a half-dozen men, ranged from 80% to 98% of the time.

When I read the gospels, I notice that Jesus doesn't have a whole lot to say on the subject. Indeed, it's occurred to me that human interest in sex and sexuality may be roughly inversely proportional to the frequency of Jesus addressing it.

A couple of months ago, I had the privilege of hearing William Willimon speak. He's a widely and highly esteemed preacher and theologian. Before he became one of the Methodists' bishops in Alabama, he was Dean of the Chapel at Duke, and a student came to him one day worried, fretting, needing to talk. The subject was sex, and after listening to him for a while, Willimon told him, "Your genitals bore Jesus to death."

Pastorally insensitive? Impossible to know. Sometimes delivering a frank, blunt, hard message is pastorally sensitive. It just may be that what seems so important to us is not so important to Jesus. The Church has been arguing about sex from its first days. Let's be very clear - I'm not talking about the abuse scandals of the Roman church where I think that there's no disagreement what has been going on there is horrendous and despicable. I'm talking about issues where there are deeply felt differences. Throughout its history, the Church has routinely engaged in controversies about sex and sexuality.

Among the first, if not the first, fights was about circumcision. The fight about circumcision prompted Paul to write to the Galatians. Paul was fighting with his beloved brothers and sisters in Christ about whether a Gentile must first become a Jew before he can become a Christian. Does a Gentile need to be circumcised to follow Jesus?

In Genesis, God told Abraham to circumcise himself and his household and his slaves, and all his descendents were to be circumcised, and God told Abraham those who weren't circumcised "shall be cut off from his people." The uncircumcised were deemed to have broken the covenant, broken their relationship with God, and so uncircumcised were cut off. (Gen 17:9-14) Christians, like Jews, have always understood themselves to be part of Abraham's family.

Circumcision was an identity-marker for Jews, showing that they were God's chosen people. Throughout history, and very much today as well, human beings of every religion have gone to great effort and pain to make themselves pleasing to God, to make themselves special, unique, superior. Jews are hardly the only circumcisers, but in the ancient Greek world it distinguished them.

I think that we can muster a lot of sympathy and understanding for the Jerusalem Christians, who were almost entirely Jews. They were loath to give up their tradition, their sense of what made them special. The most influential, established apostles -- James, Peter, John -- insisted upon circumcision. Luke says that Peter had a change of heart after a vision, and later when Peter was in Antioch he initially fraternized with Gentile Christians, but then received instructions from James, the head of the church in Jerusalem. James insisted that Peter eat kosher meals, that is that Peter separate himself from his uncircumcised Christian friends and follow the Jewish law. Peter complied, and so did the rest of the Jews in Antioch, even Barnabas.

Paul blew up. Paul gets a bad rap for having a short fuse, but certainly James' order seems outrageous to us. More clearly, Peter's wimpy-ness in not standing up to James and the circumcisers is also outrageous. Paul's passionately angry, and he deals with his anger appropriately in some ways and inappropriately in other ways. Later in his letter to the Galatians, Paul lets his temper go too far. He says, "Why don't these agitators, obsessive as they are about circumcision, go all the way and castrate themselves!" (Gal 5:12)

But Paul also handles his anger maturely. He tells the Galatians that he went and spoke to Peter face to face. He was direct. He demands Peter to stop the charade. Paul tells Peter, "If you, a Jew, live like a non-Jew when you're not being observed by the watchdogs from Jerusalem, what right do you have to require non-Jews to conform to Jewish customs just to make a favorable impression on your old Jerusalem cronies?" (Gal 2:14)

Paul sees that Peter's separating himself from the Gentile Christians is in essence cutting himself off from the presence of the risen Christ. In withdrawing from the uncircumcised, who have been baptized and made part of the mystical body of Christ, Peter is rejecting Jesus once again! He's repeating his denial of Christ. Peter is erecting a barrier, limiting God's love and care to Jews and not including Gentiles. Paul doesn't murmur and complain about this. Rather he goes and directly challenges Peter.

To the Gentile, circumcision had to be repulsive. A Gentile would have had a visceral 'yuck' factor as well as a desire to avoid the considerable pain of circumcision. Paul knew that if the gospel was yoked to circumcision, the Gentiles would be less likely to receive the gospel, but the real point for Paul is that the gospel means the law, circumcision, is no longer necessary. Paul's asking, "What was at the heart of Christian faith and identity – law or God, custom or Jesus?"

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." God is God of the Jew and of the Gentile, of the slave and of the free, of men and of women. So God creates one community and one way to new life – Jesus. There aren't two communities – circumcised and un-circumcised; and there aren't two ways to life – following the law and following Jesus. There's one Church, one Jesus.

Paul argues that the law had created barriers and made distinctions between people and that in Christ there are no longer barriers separating groups of people. In Jesus, the body of Christ, the Church, a new people comes into being. For this people, God has broken the barriers of ethnicity, race, social status, and sex – the markers that have typically divided people and have typically fostered injustice. But now, while these differences remain, they don't define us. They are not our identity. Paul insists we have our identity in Jesus, not in our background, parentage, customs, class, gender.

The vision is for all humanity to be together, one, united in relationship to God. Paul is saying that Abraham's offspring constitute a new family, a new fellowship, where all are God's children, where all are part of the family. Our ethnic, social, gender distinctions are irrelevant to God. Perhaps they are important to us, but they just might bore Jesus to death.

It is a very radical message. It was too much for many of the Jerusalem Christians to bear. The controversy continued to be painful. Indeed, it pained future Christians. Paul's letter to the Galatians scandalized St. Jerome, an irascible late 4th, early 5th century theologian and translator. Jerome couldn't abide the idea that Peter and Paul, the foremost pillars of the Church, could have had such sharp differences and that they fought and argued so intently.

The early Church was not a pseudo-community where all of its members pretended that they had no differences and covered them up, a place where there was only cheerfulness and gentleness, a place where people always played nicely with one another. That's not a real family. That's not a real community. Where's the authenticity in only presenting your most favorable self and papering over disagreements?

When people feel safe enough, when people trust enough, they express disagreement, and they are more willing to show people their real thoughts and feelings as well as their less attractive parts. This kind of honesty is a step toward real community and real intimacy.

Paul, Peter, James – they tangled with one another. It caused them pain. Paul tells the Galatians that he feels like a mother in childbirth, full of pain. He says, "I wish I were already by your side, to moderate my tone, so frustrated am I." (Gal 4:19,20) Imagine the chaos Paul felt inside himself. He must have felt a bit alone, "out there," isolated. But the unpleasant feelings of chaos and emptiness are usually an essential step toward deeper unity, real unity.

Paul says that the law had acted as a schoolmaster, a disciplinarian, a caretaker, a custodian. Now, he says, we are no longer under this guardian. In other words, we've grown up and are free; God now treats each Christian as reliable, trustworthy, adult, capable of assuming responsibility and working through unpleasant feelings. And for Paul, the mature way to handle divisions, be they in a church, or a family, or a nation, or any group, requires us to honor our relationship amid differences, to accept responsibility in the group even when we clash with it.

I'm grateful Paul won the argument about circumcision – otherwise probably none of us would be here this morning! But I expect that Paul had to know that his relationships with his brothers and sisters in Christ was more important than winning the argument, that he was still committed to the Galatians and to the Church even if they didn't recognize he was right.

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