

***PLEASING IN HIS SIGHT***  
**Psalm 96; Galatians 1:1-12**

"Edith, Get in here! I'm having to defend God all by myself!" was the terrified cry of Archie Bunker when he found himself alone with his son-in-law Meathead, the household's village atheist.

We have all sympathized at some time with both Archie and the Apostle Paul in their single handed defense of the faith against disposers and detractors. While Archie defends against one who says there is no God, Paul must contend against those who seem bent on effectively re-confining God's people to an old box from which Paul and his fellow converts have been freed by the grace of Christ.

It is interesting to note that this is the only letter in which the Apostle Paul forgoes the customary prayer of thanksgiving that follows the opening greeting. In most of his epistles, Paul goes on and on expressing appreciation, but not for these fledgling congregations in Galatia. By verse 6, Paul, the founding pastor of these churches launches into a feisty rebuke, calling into question the beliefs and behaviors of the mission churches. Paul is astonished at their fickleness and demonstrates an irritated and cranky tone.

Frankly, this is one Lectionary passage that pastors usually avoid. This is not an easy passage with which to deal. After all, we could claim that this passage is a letter not intended for our hearing, it is mail intended for others to hear. We can write it off as a personal matter between Paul and the Galatians – except – it is God's word to us. In fact the text can help us address a number of impulses or attitudes that hamper the spiritual health of each one of us in present-day Christianity.

One prevailing threat to present-day vital congregations is passionate apathy-ism. Often the Gospel of Jesus Christ is less the motivating center in the lives of believers, and more like a hobby to dabble in on the side when it is convenient. Paul's rebuke rattles this passive attitude; his intensity bursts the Hubble of our spiritual indifference. Paul is passionate about what God has done in Jesus Christ - "who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present exile age."

After 9/11, we became acutely aware of a world filled with pockets of religiously-fueled fanatics and we began to seek to understand and make room for the other, developing a tolerance for various world views. We have increasingly become loathe to draw lines that call into question or exclude others. After all, who are we to judge?

Paul, however, appears to be drawing one such line whitening the church. "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 - not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.

Paul may be compared with loving parents' bewildered and angry cries as the child quickly and easily puts aside the many years of wise and patient upbringing, taking instead, paths and practices completely opposite the lessons of home. So, where do we draw the line? How do we discern between the TRUE gospel message and imitations?

Twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth points the way across the Christological landscape, dotted with the land mines of both pluralism and fundamentalism. At the conclusion of a lecture series at Princeton Seminary in the early 1960's, Barth was asked if God was revealed in other religion too, or only in Christianity. Barth is reported to have said: "God is not revealed in any religion - including Christianity. God is revealed through his Son, Jesus Christ."

Today people are first and foremost, consumers; they want what they want when they want it, even in the church. If they don't like what they see or hear, they leave and start shopping for a better deal. Meanwhile, the pressure is constantly on church leaders 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. This creates an atmosphere of approval seeking. To Paul's question: "Am I seeking human approval...am I trying to please people, rather than pleasing God?"

When we become captive - this includes preachers and parishioners alike - to public opinion, when churches too easily become I grossed with gospel gimmicks, offering the religious goods and services people want, what is sacrificed is the ability to be a slave to Christ in service to his unchanging gospel.

Occasionally congregations experience a renewed longing to be faithful, "If only we could be like the early church today!" This Letter to the Galatians reminds us that we are! Like the churches of Galatia, we are often marked by conflict, theological confusion, and we often doctor the gospel, concocting alternative Christologies. However, Paul reminds us of what we believe.

Today, I invite you to join me as we remember what we believe the true Gospel message to be and what we, as a church, believe.