

It is said that today's passage is one of the more familiar passages in the Christian faith. Perhaps you could not site the reference, but the phrases and the ideas of being "justified by faith," dying "to the law, so that we might live to God," and being "crucified with Christ. It is no longer we who live but Christ who lives in us," are echoed in the songs and confessions, sermons and prayers of Jesus followers for millennia now.

The seeding of these phrases into our faith's consciousness has not been unintentional. The proliferation of these beliefs speaks to the seismic shakeup to which they testify. Quite literally, humanity's foundational relationship with God and one another were upended by the story that gave birth to these familiar phrases.

This morning, my prayer is that we too would be shaken by the story that shook Paul, experiencing a similar earth-shattering, vision upending that frees us to live in a world far grander and more extensive than we tend to recognize. But before we can get into the story, we need to acknowledge a couple of things. We need to acknowledge the underlying assumptions of religion.

First, religion assumes that our lives our lived in relation to God. To be religious is to be one who recognizes a being or power outside of or other than us, and attempts to live well in connection to that God. In this way, we, Christ City Church, are religious.

Second, religion assumes division, that there is a gap between human and divine, between people and God. All the visual examples of religion—traditions, moralities, cultural distinctions, unique practices, and particular exclusions—are predicated upon the assumption that the gap is real and that it must be bridged.

Fundamentally, we believe this too, that there is a dividing wall between God and humanity, a divide that is mirrored and refracted in our division between one another and all of creation.

What causes this divide, the separation of relationships is sin. Sin, our rebellion against God's good rule, and established order, which caused a fracture in every relationship. What heals and overcomes the gap, what makes right the connections are the "acts of religion":

- Atoning (repairing the wrong) for sin
- Abstaining from sin
- Absenting ourselves from the sinful (what Peter is doing in verses 11-14)
- Overcoming the effects of sin

Every religious practice can fit somewhere in this descriptive spectrum. Sin is what separates us from God, and so the religious, including the religious Jewish Christians in Galatia, are to do everything ordained not to be sinners, including not eating with those "Gentile sinners" (v.15). After all, especially for the Jews, they had an entire codex of laws (rules and regulations), that if one obeyed, he or she would ensure that they could continue to relate to God rightly: their living justified (counted righteous) and justifiable.

Fidelity to the traditions, moralities, cultural distinctions, practices, and exclusions that make up the visual image we have of religion is the means for bridging the gap created by sin, overcoming the wall that divides. Faithfulness to the “works of the law,” as Paul refers to such actions and beliefs three times in verse 16 alone, is what is necessary to be “counted righteous,” to affirm that you are indeed in a right, good-standing, relationship to God.

Sin, sin, sin, permeates the vision of the religious—including our own. But what if we were supposed to see the world through something other than sin? What if there was a moment in history that forever transformed the vision of how we relate to God and how he relates to us? What if our failure to recognize this moment, our propensity to forget this moment, and our tendency to be offended by this moment, kept us from achieving what the religious truly seek: a life with God that is undivided?

What if we are meant to breathe in deeply the air of grace (even with the pollutants of sin), and see the world through faith. Faith in the supremacy and steadfastness of God’s person and purposes. Faith visualized for us in the image of a man (wholly human and wholly divine) lifeless on an instrument of torture.

It is a controversial thought, to make sin secondary in the assumptions of religion. One could easily go too far with such freedom. Paul will address that later. But the converse may be even more damaging, we can fail to take such freedom far enough, and so make the universe changing event, “for no purpose.”

For Paul, the factual event and ingrained image of Jesus on the cross caused him to see the world (his place and the place of others within it) differently. Certainly, the air we breathe is full of pollutants—lies, corruption, insincerities, cynicism, pride, doubt, sin—but pollutants do not make up the primary particles we breathe; powerful grace does. A powerful grace that we see in a story from the first Easter. Since we just commemorated and celebrated this most Christian of holidays, it should be somewhat fresh on our minds.

We’ll jump into the story with Jesus having already been flogged and mocked, and now hanging on the torturous cross, gasping for breath and writhing in the anguish of both body and spirit.

It is the middle of the day on Friday, high noon. The sun should be at its peak, spreading light and warmth across all of Jerusalem, but instead, the skies are blanketed with dense, dark clouds. One would think it was the first darkness of early night; many of the people having lit lanterns to continue their daily labors.

For three hours, light and warmth remain hidden by a haze of darkness, and amid this shadowland, with the full weight of his body and burden pressing down upon him, ripping his ligaments, muscles, and soul; Jesus shouts out ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ that is, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’

He’s nearly at the end now. Moments later, he cries out words unknown, the moans of life given up, and yields his spirit and body over to death. The air in his lungs empty, and the blood in his heart stills. It is finished.

Except that it wasn’t, while most of our Easter stories pause here, waiting in suspense for the next 36 hours or so to pass, Matthew, in his account, lets us in on a bit more of the picture.

Amazingly, unexpectedly, at the moment Jesus gave his life over to death, the curtain of the temple which separated the Holy of Holies, divided God's presence from the people and the place where sins are forgiven (atoned for), was torn in two, from top to bottom.

This no small feat. The curtain, placed there to separate God and humanity, the sinners from the sinless, was some 40 feet tall and four inches thick. It was a significant barrier, meant to protect humanity from being consumed by God's holiness in their unholiness. A barrier that could only be breached by the high priest who had gone through a lengthy purification process, and who would tread very lightly as he presented to God the sacrifice as a plea for atonement. Waiting, hoping for a gracious heavenly fire to consume the offering and assure God's people would remain his people—people known by his presence with them for another year.

No human could pull this curtain apart, and it would take more than a pair of scissors or even the sharpest blade to slice through it. Not to mention the fact the tear started at the top! There are no 40 ft. step ladders available. No, something more than human, something at a greater height than a human or a collection of them, had to have acted upon the dividing wall.

But there is more! About the time the curtain in the temple was torn into two, the earth began to shake violently. This rock splitting intensity of labor pains opened the tombs of the Jerusalem graveyard. And guess what? People came out of those tombs! Specifically, as Matthew tells us, "many bodies of the saints [those women and men who in life could not be described without mentioning their relationship to God], those saints who had fallen asleep [as if death were but a nap], woke up! They came out of their tombs after Jesus—since he was the first of his brothers and sisters to rise again, and like Jesus, they went back to the city to those who knew them. That's right; Jesus' death released those held by death back into life; at the very moment. We don't talk about this part of the story much, but maybe we should!

Anyway, Mathew intentionally concludes his account from the perspective of Gentile observers. Non-Jewish collaborators in the gruesome and slow torture of Jesus, even if they were only following orders but more than likely the same bunch who had put the crown of thorns on Jesus' head and nailed the mocking sign above it, are now watching Jesus to make sure that the tormented is exanimate. These Matthew recounts, "saw the earthquake and what took place, [and] they were filled with awe and said, 'Truly this was the Son of God!'

(Matthew 27:45-46, 50-54)

Jesus, dead on the cross, at the moment of his crucifixion, brought down the divide between God and humanity, between sinners and the sinless; and brought an end to the greatest separator of all, death. Now the "saints" are alive, walking through life not bound but free! A feat that transported even Gentile occupiers into an awed confession. Pretty incredible moment! A moment, which for Paul, shaped the very way in which relating—relating to God and one another—was to be understood. A story that must seek deep into our consciousness and give form to the life we live with God and the world we inhabit.

But here is the thing that happens often, look again with me at Galatians 2, verse 18,

"For if I should rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor."

The irony of us religious—us people who live our lives in relation to God—is that we are prone to rebuild what has been torn down, building once again a wall between God and us and erecting barriers between one another—and thus becoming the very things we want to avoid: “transgressors,” sinners!

When we are faithful to visual examples of religion, and not ones who live by faith in powerful grace visualized in Jesus on the cross; we miss the very thing we seek: life with God undivided and a life that is mirrored and reflected in life with one another and creation. We rebuild that which has been torn down—like Peter and Barnabas, and those of the “circumcision party” are doing in Galatians two—conducting our lives out of step “with the truth of the gospel.” And in doing so, shrink our world, belittle others, and confine the spirit we have been gifted (2 Timothy 1:6-7).

But to live as ones have been crucified with Jesus, had the wrong of our sins paid for, the life we live today in our homes, in our workplaces, in Dallas, in 2020, we live by faith in the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us. We live free from death, and in the ever-expanding world of grace over sin. A life where the gap has been closed, the dividing wall removed, and the dead alive again and walking the streets! When we see the world through the vision of the cross, through faith in God on the cross, what an expansive world we can walk in!

So, let me ask you this faith family, even as I consider the question myself:

In what ways are you rebuilding what has been torn down, re-creating barriers between you and God and you and others? Walking out of step with the gospel, the good news that God is here, and he is on our side...i.e., we are “counted righteous” because of Jesus.

We pray together a new prayer in our Galatians series. A prayer that reminds us that we see the world through faith in powerful grace, and journey in that life together towards the fullness of freedom received.

PEACE | *Malcolm Guite*

Not as the world gives, not the victor’s peace,
Not to be fought for, hard-won, or achieved,
Just grace and mercy, gratefully received:
An undeserved and unforeseen release,
As the cold chains of memory and wrath
Fall from our hearts before we are aware,
Their rusty locks all picked by patient prayer,
Till closed doors open, and we see a path
Descending from a source we cannot see;
A path that must be taken, hand in hand,
Only by those, forgiving and forgiven,
Who see their savior in their enemy.
So reach for me. We’ll cross our broken land,
And make each other bridges back to heaven.