

Sermon: Imagining God  
Text: Galatians 4:4-7  
Date: December 27, 2008  
Immanuel Baptist Church  
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In all of Paul's letters, with the exception of this letter, after the greeting comes thanksgiving for the church. In First Thessalonians the thanksgiving section is the bulk of the letter. But here in Galatians there is no thanksgiving for the church. Paul is angry. He is first angry with the Christian teachers who had come to Galatia after he left and persuaded (from Paul's perspective deceived) them to put themselves under the Jewish law as a way of living out their Messianic faith. And he is angry with the Christians in Galatia for listening to these teachers and adopting the Jewish law as the means for living out their covenant relationship with God. Listen to what he says in 1:6-9 . . . he calls down a curse upon these teachers who, in his mind, are preaching "a different gospel" than what he preached to them. His words are harsh and vindictive.

Some Christian fundamentalists are drawn to passages like this because it fuels or justifies their own contentiousness. Some liberals, on the other hand, would like to cut these portions out because they present Paul as contentious and intolerant. Personally, I find some consolation in it. If Paul, the great Apostle, can speak so eloquently about how Christian love is patient and bears all things in 1 Corinthians 13, and then turn around and lose his cool and get extremely angry and vindictive, then I don't feel so bad when my life contradicts my message. I take some consolation in Paul's failure.

It is likely that these teachers were questioning Paul's motives and his authority. Paul takes it very personal. He says in 4:17: "Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may have zeal for them." This is extremely personal for Paul. Pastoral counselors often tell leaders: Don't take the attacks upon your leadership personally. Paul makes it personal.

We get a sense of Paul's outrage in verse 12 of chapter 5. These teachers were evidently advocating that they even go so far as adopt the practice of circumcision as their pledge to keep the Jewish law. Paul lashes out: "As for those agitators (who are urging circumcision), I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves." Now, don't get made at me; I'm just quoting Scripture. That's what Paul says.

In addition to Paul's anger and bitter denunciations a number of interpreters point out Paul engages in some rather convoluted logic in building his case against these teachers in Galatia. For example in 5:2-3 Paul says . . . For Paul it's either all or nothing. If you submit to circumcision then you are obligated to obey everything in the law. Some interpreters point out that this is not very good logic.

But here's the point I want to make. Even though Paul's logic is questionable and even though he is angry and lashes out in bitter diatribe, this letter contains some of the most sublime and profound statements of Christian faith to be found anywhere in Christian literature. This for me, is what makes Scripture so inspirational and transformational, it reflects the tension, struggle, and contradiction of the human condition. This is where I live—in the midst of contradiction, tension, and struggle. Isn't that where you live? This passage in Galatians 4 is a great statement of faith. Let me read it again . . .

Scriptural texts can have meaning outside their original context. Some texts can take on a life of their own, which is not necessarily a bad thing. I want to explore the possible meaning of this text for us in our context.

We need not disparage the law. We need law. Society needs law. Law provides boundaries and guidelines for living a good and healthy life. We need some restrictions and Jesus was never anti-law. The Psalmist says, "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long." A faithful Jew loves the Torah and obeys the Torah. Jesus, a faithful Jew, was not against the Jewish law; he was against the misuse and abuse of the law. Obedience to the law can be liberating. Again the Psalmist says, "I walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts." Only when the good law is used legalistically does it become oppressive.

Christ redeems us from the legalism of law, not from moral obligation. Actually as followers of Christ our moral obligation is more demanding. The moral obligation to love our enemies is more demanding than simply, "Do not murder." Christ redeems us not from moral obligation, but from the oppressive application and legalism of the law.

In Christ we are not under a system of meritocracy, where we have to measure up to certain standards in order to be accepted. We are not under a system of judicial rewards and punishments. We are under a paternal system, a familial system. We are children of God. We are accepted. We didn't have to earn this. Our adoption into God's family is a gift, it is grace. We claim it by faith.

Paul says that the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of God's special Son, has been given to us to assure us that we are all the daughters and sons of God. The Spirit helps us to know God as "Abba, Father."

This word "Abba" is a fascinating one. It occurs four times in the New Testament, two times in the Gospels and two times in Paul. It's an Aramaic word that has been transliterated into Greek, rather than translated. In other words, it is spelled in Greek as it is pronounced in Aramaic. The only reason this Aramaic word would have been preserved this way is because it was very special to the early Christians. This is the word Jesus most

often used to refer to God. Jesus, as a Palestinian Jew, would have spoken Aramaic, not Greek.

In the first century both Jews and Greeks commonly addressed God as “Father.” So to speak of God as “Father” was not new or unique to Jesus. In fact, the common synagogue invocation was “Our Father, the King.” So to speak of God as “Father” was nothing new; but Jesus employed a very uncommon Aramaic word that was primarily used within the intimate conversation of family. It is a warm, personal term often used by children, though it is not baby talk; it was used by adults too, but as far as we know it was rarely, if ever, used for God. This word conveys a child-like sense of trust, tenderness, and intimacy within the context of family. Jesus used this word for God; this is how Jesus imagined and related to God. And the frequency with which Jesus used this word to refer to God was indeed unique.

The reason the early Christians retained the Aramaic word is because of its transformational image of God. God is still transcendent. God is still God, but God is not this cold, stern, distant, and aloof “other.” God is more like a compassionate Parent. God is like a caring, loving Father or Mother.

This image transcends gender and if it is helpful for one to speak of God as Mother, then Mother can just as easily be substituted for Father. All God language is figurative language; all God language is metaphorical and symbolical language. We have to use personal qualities and human attributes to speak of and imagine God. We relate to God as a Person, even though God is more than a Person.

God is neither male nor female; God has no gender. In John 4 Jesus says to the woman of Samaria: “God is Spirit and those who worship God must worship God in spirit and in truth.” Spirit is neither masculine nor feminine. In Genesis one both man and woman are created in the image of God, both reflect God’s image.

Jesus uses the term “Father” because his culture is a predominately if not pervasively patriarchal culture. Most cultures in history have been patriarchal with a few exceptions. Only until recently in the evolution and development of humanity are civilizations like Western civilization moving away from patriarchy into more egalitarian modes of thinking, naming, relating, and living.

This is why Paul uses the terms “sonship” and “sons” in this passage. Paul is certainly not talking only about men when he uses those words; he is talking about women too. But this is the language of a patriarchal culture where women are subsumed under the term “sons.” We use to do this when our culture was more patriarchal. We would use the term “man” and “mankind” in a way that included women. Now, such language is inappropriate because we are more conscience and aware of our prejudices and we are trying to break

free from our patriarchy and become more egalitarian. Today, we use the term “humankind” or “humanity” in place of “mankind” or “man” and to fail to do so is disrespectful and insensitive. Such is the way language works.

I love the story that Richard Foster tells about a friend who was in a shopping mall with his two year old son. His son lost all control and started crying out in loud shrieks that were painful to the ears. If you ever had a child that threw these temper tantrums then you know how embarrassing this can be. This father, instead of reacting, instead of scolding his son, picked him up into his arms and, holding him close to his chest, began singing an impromptu lullaby—telling his son over and over in song how much he loved him and how special he was. By the time they reached the car the little boy was completely calm. When his father placed him in his car seat, the little boy reached out his arms to his father and said, “Sing it to me again, Daddy.”

That is a true story and to liken God to the father in the story conveys a powerful image of God’s care and love for God’s children. But the story works whether the parent is a father or mother. We could substitute in the story a mother for the father and the story still communicates God as a compassionate, caring parent. Gender is not the issue. And we can find in the Scriptures, even in a pervasively patriarchal culture, motherly images of God that break through. The whole point is that God loves us like a caring, compassionate, empathetic mother or father. If we get bogged down on gender we can miss the transformational message. It’s not about gender. God is genderless. God is Spirit. But God relates to us like a loving mother or father.

This is the transformational message of Jesus. We can know and experience God as a compassionate, loving Parent. In one passage Jesus says, “Don’t be anxious about what you will eat or what you will wear.” Jesus is speaking to people who have every reason to be anxious. They were poor, day laborers. They didn’t know if they would get work from one day to the next. They lived from day to day, hoping that they would have enough money to buy food or clothing. And then Jesus comes along with this radical message about God being a loving Father who will take care of them. Jesus says, “Look at the birds of the air. They do not sow or reap or store food away in barns, but your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and gone tomorrow, will God now not much more clothe you—you of little faith?” God knows what you need, says Jesus, and God will provide for what you need. Seek God’s kingdom. Pursue God’s justice and peace. And God will take care of your needs. That was a radical message; and it still is.

Paul says, “You are not slaves, you are God’s children. And because you are God’s children, you are heirs. God is yours. Life is yours. The world to come is yours. It all belongs to you because you belong to God.”

Gracious God,

If there is anyone in this place who does not know in her heart that she belongs to you, if there is anyone here that does not know that he is your child, give that one the faith to claim his or her birthright right now, give them the faith to claim their true identity as your children and to experience your Spirit affirming and assuring and confirming in their mind and heart that you love them. And help all of us to live by faith, free of worry and anxiety, free of legalism and fear, free of the crushing burden of trying to earn our way, as we trust your loving care and provision and seek first of all your kingdom on earth. In Jesus’ name. Amen.