

“Paul Is Angry!” sermon by The Rev. Keenan Colton Kelsey 6/10/07  
Noe Valley Ministry, a progressive Presbyterian church

Text: Galatians 1:11-14 For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus. Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him for fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother. In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only heard it said, 'The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.' And they glorified God because of me.

I FIRST TITLED THIS SERMON, “Paul Is Mad” – but then we all know Paul is often quite mad, as in crazy! So I clarified: Today, we find Paul angry – angry about what had happened in Galatia. Kathy has pointed out the signs of that anger – Paul finds himself with his back to the wall.

It was not that the Galatian church reverted to their pre-conversion beliefs. It was rather that they had been swept off their feet by a new set of preachers who were much more like fundamentalists than Paul. These newcomers upheld scripture to the letter and thus insisted that the Galatians must be circumcised, as Genesis 17 requires. Paul's mission excused Gentiles from circumcision, and the new preachers saw this as a sell-out of the truth. They thought Paul was making faith easy. It may have been a boon for Paul's mission, but they saw it as a betrayal both of scripture and of Israel.

Does this dynamic, this tension sound familiar to anyone?

Paul passionately believed in opening the way to Jesus through the widest possible doors. After all, Christ met him at the most unpredictable time, in the most unconventional way.

On the road to Damascus Jesus appeared in a bright light, flipped him right off of his donkey, and flipped him from an ardent persecutor, a cruel oppressor, into being an apostle to all the nations. Paul had lived the drama of unorthodox conversion and this experience shifted his focus from commandments to a more dynamic approach which set love at the center, and applied it freely to life's issues.

Who says that the Bible does not live today?

After spending nearly three years trying to absorb and live into his dramatic conversion, Paul arrived in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey, and he had found the Galatians, who were a settlement of migrant Celtic peoples. His gospel had been well received, and he had left a solid Christian witness. But then others began teaching. These opponents claimed better credentials than Paul had. They could probably "name-drop" leading apostles with whom they had been associated. They said that Peter himself affirmed their teaching over and against Paul's. And Paul, they argued, had no first-hand authority. There was much more at stake than Paul's ego (though that must have played a role). It was a matter of what lay at the heart of faith.

Are you beginning to make explicit parallels with today's world?

We come together each week at least in part to consider that very question: what lies at the heart of our faith. When we let God into our lives, what does that mean? Each of us continues to live into that question, and we do so as a church as well. What does it mean to be Noe Valley Ministry, a progressive and celebrating Christian church, a group of people organized as Christ's body on earth?

Well, we have some specific convictions. On the back of your bulletin you can read our church vision and mission. When Noe Valley Ministry was first formed, the congregation was unanimous that that this was first and foremost a Peace Church. From that, there seemed no other choice than to also be a Sanctuary Church and a More Light Church. And so we organized ourselves around a gospel of love, prayer, justice, and inclusivity -- a solid center we felt was God's word, God's vision, for us. And now, once again, we are remarkably aligned with Paul as we are called to define and defend our understanding of the gospel. This past Wednesday nine of us met with representatives from a Discernment Team from our Presbytery. Several other churches were also represented, and we expressed our belief and commitment to the full inclusion of gays, lesbians, transgenders, and bisexuals, as ministers, elders, and deacons. Irene talked poignantly and passionately about Lisa Larges, member of this church who has been seeking ordination and being denied, ordination for 22 years. Heather talked about justice delayed and the fact that the Presbytery is still not a safe place for glbt people. I talked about how the General Assembly had passed the Peace Unity and Purity report in order to open up the denominational logjam and allow individuals to be considered for ordination based on their whole being and faith, not just on sexual orientation. After all, that is what the Book of Order instructs us. And bless Maria's heart, she asked the group to stop talking in such long academic and speak simpler truths that we can all understand. It was a hard meeting.

Is it grace with freedom to remove barriers, including biblical ones if need be, -- or is it law enshrined in an attitude towards the Bible ?

Make no mistake about it, our denomination is in an all-out war to come to some definitive conclusions about the status of people who has different sexual orientations. It is a struggle that goes much deeper than glbt issues, it is a basic orientation of how we read the Bible and how we live it out.

Had Paul abandoned scripture, betrayed Israel, committed apostasy? Have we? How do you approach scripture if you are not going to accept all of it? Won't abandoning rules lead to lax behavior and moral disaster? What basis is there in the biblical tradition for arguing that only faith and grace matter?

We are not going to solve these questions today. But it might be helpful as we go forward to continue to align ourselves with Paul.

Paul wants to counter his opponents, who are trying to undermine his gospel of freedom by disputing his credentials and authority. He refuses to allow himself to be drawn down into a debate about legal authorization. So convinced is he that faith sets people free, and that this has a transforming effect far beyond any meticulous observance of laws; he will go on to speak of love not as a reason to keep rules, but as a fruit of the Spirit, a guiding principle that is greater than faith or hope. Further, Paul was dedicated to the creation and maintenance of Christian community –. Paul keeps writing that to the early Church in the midst of all their divisions and differences. To the Colossians he writes: "In Him all things hold together." To the Ephesians he writes: "Christ is our peace who has broken down the dividing wall of hostility," and he makes it clear that the unity Christ brings is not achieved by elimination of diversity or a denial of it. It's a unity achieved in the midst of our diversity. It is a spirit of humility and gentleness and patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain a unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. Speak the truth in love, he says. Say those things that build one another up."

Kathleen, Norris says: "The church is like the Incarnation itself, a shaky proposition. It's a human institution, full of ordinary people, sinners like me, who do and say cruel things. But it is also a divinely inspired institution, full of good purpose, which partakes of a unity far greater than the sum of its parts." I believe that.

This struggle is not easy. Our sister denomination, The Episcopalian Church, took a courageous and spirit-led leap forward in the election of openly gay Bishop Gene Robinson. But the Anglican communion took a major step backwards when, two weeks ago, - The Archbishop of Canterbury refused to invite two American bishops, to attend the Lambeth Conference in July and August 2008,. The Lambeth Conference does not determine Church doctrine, but is meant to be a forum for reflection and discussion, and an opportunity to overcome internal problems, But in the name of "peace," the archbishop chose to exclude both Robinson and .Martyn Minns, a deeply conservative Episcopalian, who was installed last year as the head of a new Nigerian-

based church branch in the United States. He apparently feels uniformity is a way toward unity.

Noe Valley Ministry is in disagreement and even dissent from our denomination. Yet we must continue to make every effort to keep everyone at the Table. Our challenge is to remain supportive and faithful to the Church we love while not abandoning commitments and convictions about justice and inclusivity which this Church has nurtured in us. And do you want to hear something really interesting? Something preposterous on the surface of it? The Church is actually God's alternative to the propensity of the world to divide and contend and fight along lines of tribe, clan, race, and religion. The Church represents God's precious alternative vision.

There is a scene in the original KARATE KID movie that I vividly remember. The main character, Daniel, is befriended by the wise and elderly maintenance man, Mr. Miyagi. Daniel goes to see Mr. Miyagi and finds him trimming a delicate bonsai tree. Daniel is fascinated by this, so Miyagi tells him to try his hand at it. Daniel replies that he doesn't have any idea how to do it. Miyagi encourages him to try. First, he tells Daniel to close his eyes. Then Miyagi tells Daniel to picture in his mind the way he wants the tree to look when he is finished. Daniel concentrates fixedly on every single detail of the tree. Miyagi asks him if he has got the tree in his mind. "Then," Miyagi says, "open your eyes and begin." Daniel starts slowly to trim the tree. Every move is deliberate and focused. Then he stops, unsure, and asks, "How do I know if my picture is right?" And Miyagi replies, "If the picture comes from your heart, then it must be right. Just trust your picture."

We are God's vision for a divided world. You and we are what God means by unity and diversity. When our struggle seems difficult, even impossible, we can remember the story of Elijah and the widow, one of hundreds of stories about abundance, about new life. about generosity and compassion, about transformation. and God's promise and God's providence We are called to keep showing up until our witness calls forth justice.

You and we are, in many ways I'm convinced we do not know, the body of Christ. May it be so. Amen.

*Julian of Norwich.*

*"If there be anywhere on earth [where] a lover of God is always kept safe from falling, I know nothing of it, for it was not shown me. But this was shown: that in falling and rising again we are always kept in the same precious love."*