

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

Galatians 2:11-21

21st May 2017

Spirit... given the words are not inspired... but the speakers of those words... and the inspiration is not the story... but the tellers of that story... may our words... and the stories we tell... become alive in our telling of them... So be it... Amen

This congregation has a twitter feed... In fact it has two... and has had... for about three years now... but they have never been used... three years ago... few of us would have been as au fait with the twitter sphere as we are now... but thanks to a certain president's early morning twitter broadcasts... we are all quite up to date with the technology... even if we don't always appreciate the contents...

The letter writer Paul... didn't have the luxury of digital technology... and in some ways... personally I think he would have benefitted from it... condensing his long passionate letters... into just 140 characters... which is the maximum length for a tweet... though I doubt he could condense his zeal and enthusiasm to a single tweet...

A tweet forces you to be concise... and while congregations may appreciate that... preachers don't always appreciate that... case in point... The other advantage of a tweet is that you know what the person you are replying to has said... It's printed there above your reply... With Paul we've got only one side... and we do not know what it is he is replying to...

For most of my life I have managed to avoid Paul... Give me a good story any day... and perhaps my avoidance of him... stems from how we initially meet him... holding the coats at Stephen's stoning... He's Moriarty in the Early Church... a persecuter... hugely aggressive towards the first Christians... until his Damascus Road experience... when the world as he understood it... flipped over...

And the passion he directed towards persecuting the church... turns 180 degrees... and with equal force... is now directed towards opening the church to all including those the traditions don't fit...

He moves within the Gentile church... where he leads and guides and shares his insights... but is then called away onto his missions... And as soon as he is gone... the central offices in Jerusalem... descend with a more conservative... narrower version of the faith... It's like presbytery doing a visitation... affirming all the rules about eating... purity... circumcision...

Paul arrives back... and is livid with the leaders of the central church... who are determined to keep to the rules... and lay down the same law for Gentiles and Jews... and in effect making Gentiles Jewish clones...

"Hypocrites!" he calls them... especially Peter... disciple of Jesus... happy enough to eat with the Gentiles when no one is looking... but when the leaders come up from Jerusalem... he's all pious and righteous... "Have some integrity!" says Paul... "Are the rules so much more important than the relationships you've built with your brothers... Is not what we have in common not far more important and significant than the rules they are imposing that divide us?"...

And you can imagine Paul in that moment... seeing how... for the early church... the law... is becoming more important than the right relationships the law was meant to help create... and it makes him angry... that the rules... were turning into graven images...

And there is an important moment here for us all perhaps... especially as the church nationally begins the General Assembly... More laws will be passed this week... that shape the kind of relationships we will have with each other...

But as someone has said before... the more rules we have... the less trust we have in each other... because the more we live towards each other by rules... the less room there is for grace... where everyone is an exception to those rules... We need laws only when we don't trust each other... or fear our neighbour...

And there... right at the beginning of the church... is our lesson... Paul sees the church not constructed around laws... but one built around grace... the same grace God lives towards us...

And that is a much harder way to live than living by the rules... At least with rules you can fall back on them... and say... There's no discussion... I'm not allowed to do that... or I can punish you because you've done that to me... To live by grace... is a much more difficult option... for we have to consider each other in a more generous... life affirming way...

Which is what the church tries to do... and does so again this week... One report has already made headlines... which is exploring the possibility of ministers officiating at equal marriages...

At the moment ministers aren't allowed to perform them... it's the law... But living by grace... is a lot more difficult... we don't have rules to fall back on... we have to live towards each other... where our prejudices and fear... are a lot more exposed... It is much easier to keep to the law... the kingdom however is made rather... of grace...

And the discussion the church begins this week... echoes the argument Paul is having with the leadership of the church... Rules were put in place... because of fear of the Gentiles... and fear of what might happen to their understanding of things... but Paul... who knows Gentiles... lived with them... ate with them... worked among them... realised when you know people of whatever culture, gender or religion... you don't live towards them by law... but by grace... Each is an exception to the rules... because your relationship is based on trust and love...

And living towards each other gracefully... justly... with unconditional welcome and love... is far nearer the relationship we have with God...

So Paul... once a legalist... is now showing us a more graceful way... where those outside our normal terms of reference... like Gentiles who live a different tradition... are included... not by keeping certain outward signs of some legal requirements... but by the generosity of grace... which grows as our worldview and terms of reference and experience of God's kingdom... also grows...

And so the question comes... just how big is grace?... Well grace is as big as your idea of God... and where does grace stop... wherever a relationship governed by law starts...

If grace stops at the border of what is familiar... then so does God... but if God finds us in relationship now with those we once feared... or misunderstood... or have once been prejudiced towards... in places we have not been before... then we are experiencing the breadth and generosity of grace and a gospel that has grown and evolved into new places...

The headlines and tweets from the church this week... will be plenty... but they will not define us... or limit grace to 140 characters... We live in an evolving relationship... with God... our neighbours... and our world... May we hold the General Assembly... that it might celebrate every new place... the law once limited... but now the breadth and grace the gospel... invites us to share...