

GOD AT WORK

The saints are many, and many are alive all around us. We don't always agree about who is on the list, though it is said that the humble can learn from anybody. Nevertheless, while we all have our own personal list of saints who have especially blessed us, there are some we hold in common.

The Apostle Paul is one of these. This is partly because he came so early and was a participant in the earliest Christian communities. Much more than that, his Christian experience was dramatic and intentional. That is, he really meant it. That does not make him "right," but it does make him a fascinating and trustworthy witness to the Christ, and to the Christian WAY.

It's fun to play in Galatians. Like with any relationship, we don't get to the best of Paul with casual, shallow, and occasional encounters. It takes time, interest, thoughtfulness, caring. Then we begin to feel the depths beneath the surface, and understand something of what he was going through, and why.

So now we have moved into the second chapter of Galatians. We can quickly see that Paul is struggling against the influence of Christians with whom he does not agree. He is in a power struggle, and hopeful that his friends will see the issues clearly. It is the classic struggle between Law and Gospel – between trusting in our best efforts and behavior, or trusting in the grace and love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. But that is always and also a struggle between trusting human traditions and institutions, or trusting in the guidance of the Holy Spirit – in the presence, the personal caring, and the specific purposes of a Living God.

Since the time Paul was among them, others have visited the Galatian churches. We have to figure this out or we cannot understand this letter at all. Why is Paul being so passionate, even cantankerous? His first missionary journey took him into central Turkey – Galatia – where he established four churches. Do not imagine buildings or white steeples in your mind. We are talking about small groups of people – so-called "house churches" in four different towns – who have responded to Paul's preaching. They heard him first in the synagogue of their town.

He told them that Jesus was the promised Messiah; that Jesus had been sent by God; that Jesus was the inevitable next phase and fulfillment of Judaism; that Jesus was the fulfillment of the biblical prophecies, but that nobody had realized it until after they had crucified Him – until He had appeared to them as the Resurrected Christ. And doubtless Paul told them how he himself had tried to destroy the followers of Jesus, until Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus.

The problem with Paul's Message of grace and love was that it put the Jewish leaders and the Jewish establishment in a bad light. They had killed God's Messiah. It was a harsh dilemma, no matter how you came at it. Either Jesus deserved what He got, or there had been a terrible mistake. If it was a terrible mistake but nobody would admit it, then that was a second mistake even worse than the first. If it was not a mistake, then there should be no Christian Movement, and why were people talking nonsense, telling all these lies, causing all this furor? So it was a terrible dilemma, and there was no way to smooth over it. People who have encountered the Risen Christ are not about to keep quiet about it. And people who have not encountered the Risen Christ do not see why they should be blamed for heinous crimes when they are just trying to be faithful to the religion they have been taught and have tried to follow all of their lives.

Remember that there was no formal split between Judaism and Christianity yet; there wouldn't be for another thirty or forty years. We are seeing the mayhem of a religious culture and tradition (Judaism) trying to deal with a dramatic new revelation welling up from within itself. Some accepted and believed in it; others did not. So the reaction to Paul's Message of grace and love was dramatic. They beat him and stoned him and left him for dead. Only, there were small groups of people in each town who found Paul's Message compelling – and overwhelming. The Holy Spirit had invaded them too. Some of them helped Barnabas get Paul to an insignificant and out-of-the-way little village called Derbe (forty-five miles south of Iconium, three miles northwest of Zasta), where he could recover from his wounds. And while he was recovering, guess what? A little house church formed in Derbe. I wonder how that happened!

Once sufficiently recovered, it was only logical for Paul to go east from Derbe to Tarsus, his home town, less than two hundred miles away. But no! Back into the lion's den went Paul, though more quietly this time,

to visit all the little groups of people – the “churches” – that had responded to the Message.

Meanwhile, news eventually traveled from the angry Jews of Galatia back to Jerusalem. They told of this strange duo that had been raiding synagogues and masquerading as faithful Jews so that they would be invited to preach and teach on the Sabbath – where they then twisted the Scriptures all around, insisting that a dead criminal was the Messiah and that He rose from the dead (of all the ludicrous ...) – and they ended up stealing members away from the synagogue. Whew! Well!!!

Now, the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem (“Jewish Christians” is an awkward phrase; remember, there was no official Christianity yet, and *all* the Christians in Jerusalem, and most of the Christians in all Israel, were Jewish – born and bred, raised and taught) were still living according to Jewish ways and customs. They had no particular reason not to. They loved and honored Jesus, but they still went to the temple, ate kosher, and kept Jewish laws and customs. After all, so did Jesus. But the point is this: Their well-being, their jobs, and their security depended upon their convincing the Jewish culture around them that, while they loved and believed in Jesus, they were still good, faithful, practicing Jews. And if it became clear that they were not good, faithful, practicing Jews, what would happen? They would be persecuted, ostracized, driven out, even killed – as many of them eventually were. Remember Stephen? James the disciple? And later, James the brother of Jesus?

So now the Jewish neighbors, some in positions of great authority, came to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and said, “What’s going on? We hear from our relatives in Galatia that some of your leaders are trying to steal our people from the synagogues – teaching them things that aren’t Jewish at all, and calling us all a bunch of murderers. Are you guys Jews, like you pretend to be, or not?”

The threat was real, and serious. So the Christian Jews in Jerusalem replied that these so-called leaders were upstart troublemakers without authority or sanction who would soon be put in their place. Then they sent angry messengers to Antioch demanding to know who gave Paul and Barnabas permission to weaken and threaten the position of Jesus’ followers in Jerusalem, and the reputation of Christians everywhere. And they sent Jewish Christian messengers to Galatia to meet with those who had listened to Paul, and to inform them that Paul was a

fraud without knowledge or authority; that they needed to make sure they lived like good Jews; and that they needed to make sure all the Jews in Galatia knew it, so that no more bad reports reached Jerusalem about followers of Jesus being a threat to Judaism. “It may seem okay for you to be a little sloppy out here in the boonies,” they said, “but back in Jerusalem, our lives and our livelihood are at stake.”

And of course, you remember Paul’s response to this development. We have the letter: *“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel.... You stupid Galatians! Who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?”* Have you heard the old expression, “The fat was in the fire”?

So I’m playing in Galatians, and hoping you are too. Sometimes we have played with huge themes, and sometimes with side issues. Today I want to muse with you about a tiny little detail, a mere turn of phrase. I quote from the eighth verse of the second chapter: *“The same God who was at work in Peter’s mission to the Jews was also at work in mine to the Gentiles.”*

GOD IS AT WORK. Do you hear that?

Paul really believed that God was at work in Peter’s ministry. He also believed that God was at work in his own. He could see it in the lives of the people he worked with. If it saddened him that more people did not believe the Gospel, it must also have surprised him that so many did. What moved them to respond so incredibly? Surely not his own few and feeble words. It had to be the Holy Spirit. Why else would they risk so much so quickly and willingly? So Paul had been carried off, nearly dead, to a tiny hole-in-the-wall village called Derbe to recover from his wounds. Nobody would look for him there. But what a disaster! His career had very nearly ended before it began. And how long was he holed-up, recuperating in Derbe, where he never meant to go – where nobody would go on purpose? Only, there he made a life-long friend named Gaius, who would travel the world with him, even to Jerusalem. And what of Lystra, where Paul had been stoned and left for dead? Not a very impressive way to finish an evangelical tour.

But from Lystra came a young man named Timothy, who would not only become one of Paul's dearest friends, but would carry the Message for many years after Paul was dead and gone. The outer context does not have to obliterate the inner conviction. God is at work.

"The same God who was at work in Peter's mission to the Jews was also at work in mine to the Gentiles."

Despite what looks to us like dramatic action on Paul's part, Paul didn't feel like he was doing any of this. It was God at work. The Holy Spirit was in charge. Paul was just along for the ride – hanging onto the coattails, taking orders and suggestions when he could "hear" them clearly enough – but he had no idea how it was happening, who would respond, what would come of it. He even thought the world was about to end (and he was dead wrong about that), but it didn't matter. God was at work. God was doing it. Paul was only trying to cooperate, go with it, be useful in little ways around the edges of God's dynamism.

You know what's coming, don't you? "The same God who was at work in Peter's mission, and in Paul's, is also at work in yours!" Hard, isn't it? I mean, hard to take it seriously – without any jaundice, without equivocation. Paul really meant it, and he meant it on the level we just put it on too. *"Whatsoever ye do, do it as unto the Lord."* (Colossians 3:17, 23; Ephesians 6:5-7) It has always been the belief of Christians that God is at work in them; that any work they do is an offering to God; that God will inspire and help them with their work – indeed, that behind the outward level of physical labor, there is a larger and more important task going on and they are participants in it. God is organizing and choreographing things on levels we can only dimly see, but it is happening nevertheless, and we are part of it if we choose to be. And we can become more conscious of it if we open ourselves to be the willing servants of this God.

By the way, where do you work? A friend of mine was confessing just the other day that for years she did not take God to work with her. God and church and spiritual growth and stuff like that were in one compartment of life, but work and career and success and dealing with the world were in an entirely different compartment of life. You remember how Charlemagne held his right arm up out of the water when he was baptized, because he still had a lot of infidels to kill? It's okay to trust God with the soul – with the inner stuff that is private and personal – but in the outer world, it's still up to us; God cannot be trusted to

understand or know how things work in the real world. So God does not get our work – our energy and our labor. And he does not get our allegiance and loyalty and obedience – not where it really counts, or where others might be influenced by it.

By the way, where do you work? God wants to go to work with you. God wants to go with you to your work. Lots of people do not believe this, but I hope that everyone who ever comes here ends up believing this. It is the dimension of life where we get to be partners with God on a serious basis. To have such a Partner to work with, and to work for, turns work back into joy. If you do not believe this, you are missing at least fifty percent of the joy and delight of life, since that is the portion of our waking hours that most of us put into work.

A Zen master was invited to a great Catholic monastery to give instructions in Zen practice. He exhorted the monks there to meditate and try to solve their koan (Zen question) with great energy and zeal. He told them that if they could practice with full-hearted effort, true understanding would come to them. One old monk raised his hand. “Master,” he said, “our way of prayer is different. We have been praying in the simplest fashion without effort, waiting instead to be illuminated by the grace of God. In Zen, is there anything like this illuminating grace that comes to one as the sheer gift of God’s caring?” The Zen master looked back and laughed. “In Zen,” he said, “we believe that God has already done his share.”

Just so! Get God out of here, and let’s take over and finish it up. Isn’t that the way it goes? God already did the divine part and then departed; now we get to do our own thing however we wish or however we think best. Is that right? No, that is wrong! In Christendom, we believe that God is still at work – creation is still in process. The outpouring of love and grace and forgiveness to all who will receive it is still available. Whether we work by faith or by grace, we work – and by strange and often mysterious ways, God is at work in our work. In fact, our work turns out to be small bits and pieces in God’s far-greater working.

“For the same God who was at work in Peter’s mission to the Jews was also at work in mine to the Gentiles” – and is also at work whenever and wherever YOU work. If you will allow it. If you will have it so.

GOD AT WORK

How often we suspect or assume that whatever it is we are doing, it couldn't be very important, at least not important enough to be of any real concern to God. And yet, is this not the God who made all things – even us, and all that we touch? There is nothing in this universe that God is not interested in! There is no place and no task *anywhere* in which God wouldn't appreciate having a faithful, responsive, and obedient servant. Oh, be one of them!

Friends, it is only a simple reminder: Wherever you are, whatever your work, your efforts can be dedicated to God – your labor can be in partnership with God. You have a right, and indeed an imperative, to claim this work as part of your Path – indeed, as a large part of your Christian WAY. If this is not part of your daily awareness, you will not be watching for the guidance – and you will not be conscious of the expansion that God is trying to bring through your efforts.

“The same God who was at work in Peter’s mission to the Jews was also at work in mine to the Gentiles.” This same God will also be at work with you, if you will allow it and cooperate with it. And you will never again be bored with your work.