

Transforming Power

July 7, 2013

Galatians 6:(1-6) 7-16

When it comes to reading the Bible, I have found over the years that many people have a tendency to latch onto verses that reinforce their philosophy of life and affirm their way of doing things. They seem to like passages that give the warm, fuzzy feelings without challenging them.

I'm sure you remember Simon and Garfunkel, popular folksingers of the 1970s. One of the lines from their hit song, "The Boxer," certainly told the truth when it said, "A man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest."

And I think someone could easily latch on to the opening words of our passage from Galatians 6 that Jean read about sowing and reaping, and make them fit popular notions about life being a do-it-yourself proposition. After all, doesn't the apostle Paul declare that "you reap whatever you sow" (6:7)?

You all have heard many, many sermons over the years, and I'm sure you're aware that so often they really boil down to pragmatic lessons on how to solve problems, create happiness, and get ahead.

Of course, Christianity is practical, and the scriptures do guide us in dealing with the challenges and possibilities of everyday life. But without the gospel message, preaching becomes nothing more than works religion.

The shelves in bookstores everywhere are lined with self-help books. People desperately pour over these volumes, attend seminars, and watch Oprah and Dr. Phil, trying somehow to attain the good life.

To be honest, one of the great challenges many pastors face is to keep from thinking of ministry as a career rather than a calling. It becomes very easy to measure success by things like building programs and attendance charts.

It is very tempting to structure preaching so that no one is offended, particularly those who might be seeking a church home or a relationship with Christ. And those who lapse into that style even find scripture to draw on.

After all, didn't Paul say in 1 Corinthians 9:22 that he would be all things to all people in order to save some? Personally, I don't think it is possible to be all things to all people, but apparently Paul did.

I do remember as a youngster growing up noticing something very interesting about my pastor's preaching. This was back before the proliferation of worship services on television, but there was radio.

We had both a Sunday morning and a Sunday evening worship service, and, of course, being very actively involved in my church, I was always there for both.

The morning service was broadcast on the radio. It seemed to me that the morning sermons, going out over the air, were much more general and benign, whereas the evening sermons, when it was just "us," our own folks, were much more hard-hitting and specific.

As I said, I wondered about that, and later, when I was preparing for ministry and that pastor and I would sit down and discuss theology and related things, I asked him about that perception I had had.

He acknowledged that, yes, that could well have been the case, maybe not so much intentionally but with more of a sub-conscious feeling that you weren't quite sure who might be hearing you.

So yes, marketing can shape preaching, and many preachers begin to hold forth about the importance of living a good life so that we will receive wonderful rewards here and now.

Preach like that and listeners might be inclined to nod their approval and feel reassured that they have the resources within themselves to earn the "good life."

A popular prosperity gospel has been making the circuit for some time nowadays that asserts precisely this, and those who preach it are packing in the crowds.

But Paul hits that kind of bootstraps theology squarely between the eyes with his declaration, "May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal 6:14).

A man once announced to the famous evangelist D. L. Moody, "Sir, I am a self-made man." To which Moody replied, "Congratulations. You have saved God a great responsibility."

There is brokenness in our world. The human race collectively and individually is at odds with God. Look at the magazines that line our shelves at the checkout stands. They are not filled with stories about the despair and crying needs of our inner cities.

Tabloids are not going to sell out by featuring articles about opportunities in the Peace Corps. They're crammed with leering accounts of the escapades of the rich and famous.

Popular magazines tell us how to slim down, look younger, and get more pleasure. Evidence for the narcissistic obsessions of our society abounds. Martin Luther was right when he said that, after the fall, the human race was "curved inward upon itself."

Again, from the world of popular music, The Beatles had a song that repeated endlessly the line, "I, me, me, mine."

A self-centered world like ours loves to hear sermons about self-improvement. But this is a world of urban blight, failed marriages, and empty lives. This world will never become the realm of God apart from the cross of Christ.

Only through crucifixion can there be a resurrection. Our faith clearly teaches that only by dying to self can we begin to live for others. And this happens not by fresh resolution or greater effort. It comes through the cross of Christ.

The apostle Paul flatly asserts that something happened to him when Jesus Christ went to the cross. Paul, too, was an accomplice in the world's rebellion against God's way. There was a time when Paul lived for himself and his immediate desires.

But the cross changed all that. Jesus was not just a solitary martyr going to his death. Jesus died as our representative, including us in his death. When he died, we died. And when he rose, we rose.

Thus Paul could make the surprising assertion that, by the cross long ago, the world was crucified to him and he to the world. All humankind is bound up together in what Jesus did on Calvary.

I never will forget something that happened to me many years ago. I don't remember all the details, but I was preaching to a group that included a lot of theologians and ministers, and I had chosen as the topic of my sermon the Cross of Christ.

After the session, one of the attendees came up to me and said something that stays with me to this day. He commented on my preaching about the cross, and what he said was the courage that it took to do that.

Because, he said, preaching about the cross just isn't done much anymore.

Well, I don't know, maybe I would like to have been flattered, but the truth is, it didn't take courage – it took a conviction, which I still have, that the atoning sacrifice of Jesus the Christ is the uniqueness and the essence of Christianity.

In the Cross Christianity lays claim to having the most universally recognized symbol in all of world history. The Cross is more recognizable than a Coca-Cola can, CNN, or any nation's flag. And the centrality of the Cross has even become part of our language.

Every time we say, "this is crucial", or "that is the Crux of the matter" we borrow language from the centrality of the Cross. Yet many both inside the church and outside do not understand the message of the Cross, or its centrality.

It's common to hear people object to the Christian gospel by saying, "Isn't the real point of Christianity the ethics and love that Jesus taught us?" Can't we get away from these divisive things like His death and resurrection?

Again to quote Martin Luther, he wrote that "no word in the Bible can be understood apart from the Cross". When the Apostle Paul ministered in Corinth, he said, "I resolved when I was with you to know nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified."

If you read Paul's writings you will find that he takes up many topics, but he relates them all to the Cross of Christ.

Other religions at their best give us fine ethical teachings. The Buddha said that it matters not if his followers even remembered him. But in Christianity, the person of Jesus Christ is the whole of the matter, and the Cross is the crux or crucial point.

The real need in the world is not more moral teaching, but a gospel that can bring change to the hearts of all people.

The editorial decisions of the gospel writers reveal that in the eyes of the people who knew Jesus firsthand, and lived beside him intimately for three years, the Cross of Jesus is the most important event of all.

In fact, a gospel scholar insightfully stated that the New Testament gospels are not so much biographies as they are "passion narratives with extended introductions." The author of the Gospel of John ends his writing by saying if he were to write down the many things Jesus did "the whole world would not have room for the books."

What biographer would ever write about a fascinating person by spending the bulk of his time writing about that person's death even omitting whole eras of that person's life? No publisher would allow such an account to go to print. It would be considered grossly unbalanced.

Yet all through John's gospel we read of the Cross. The N.T. writers would lead us to the opposite conclusion. That anyone who seeks to understand Jesus apart from the importance of the Cross is not balanced in their understanding.

The Apostle Paul's understanding of the Cross caused him to write, "May it never be that I should boast except in the Cross". Is that your understanding of the Cross?

Paul humbly confesses that the only thing he can boast about is that Christ died for him.

The great thing to which he wants to draw everyone's attention is that Jesus of Nazareth took pain, ascended the hill, and in the mighty act of atonement, crucified the world and his former self. By faith, we can participate in what Christ did for us long ago.

The prescribed lectionary epistle reading for this Sunday calls for Galatians 6:7-16. But I wanted to include the first six verses of that 6th chapter because I believe they teach us three things about the Christian life.

First, it is a caring life - lifting up the stumbling, bearing another's burdens, working for the good of all. It is not so much inward looking as outward looking.

Second, the Christian life is a transformed life. We are no longer the same. A true personal encounter with Jesus Christ will change you, in a dramatic, positive way.

Third, it is a Christ-centered life. The living reality of our lives is Christ. In Christ, we are new creations, and we are able to say, as Paul did, that it is no longer I who lives but Christ living in me.

It is striking that Paul declares the cross to have an ongoing impact. It is not, he says, merely the fact that he was crucified with Christ so that Christ took his place in the past.

This is a fact with contemporary implications. I continue to be crucified with Christ, says Paul. I continue to have victory over my selfish and sinful inclinations through the Crucified One.

And so, my Christian friends, Go forth, forth into your Monday morning and all the days beyond. Your life is a calling from God. Your relationships with your friends, your co-workers, and your neighbors all present opportunities to sow in fruitful ways, to make a loving difference.

Lift up the stumbling one, encourage the fainthearted. Feed the hungry. In due time, you will reap a harvest through the Crucified One who died and now lives to walk every step with you.