

EVE OF THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | JUNE 18, 2022

ISAIAH 65:1-9 | PSALM 22:19-28 | GALATIANS 3:23-29 | LUKE 8:26-39

There's a show that used to be on TV a lot, maybe it's still on, called "American Ninja Warrior." The premise of the show is that contestants have to do an incredibly arduous obstacle course. They climb up walls, run across water, hang from monkeybars covered in margarine.

But the real twist comes when someone finishes the course. They put their hands on their knees and gasp for breath. Because that's when the camera zooms out and you see the rest of the obstacle course. This person isn't even halfway done.

That's sort of what's going on in today's letter from Galatians. This letter was written by St. Paul to a church that thought it had reached the finish line when they were really only part of the way there.

A little bit of context for you. The early church, which started as a Jewish community, was trying to figure out whether to allow Gentiles, non-Jews, into the community. It's very contentious. Lots of arguments going back and forth. And eventually they decide that they will let non-Jews into the community. Imagine the church as the contestant who thinks they've made it over the obstacles and can go relax now.

And here the camera pulls back and reveals they're not done yet. They're just getting warmed up. Because they have another obstacle to navigate. If non-Jews can become part of this community, how do they come in? How do they enter?

The answer that the church in Galatia came up with is that Gentiles who want to join have to come in through Judaism. They have to keep the law. And once you take that first step, once you adhere to a certain set of behaviors and practices, then you can become a descendant of Abraham and recipient of God's covenants.

St. Paul has a different answer. And it's the one he outlines in today's reading. Gentiles can become part of this community, but they're not going to do it by adhering to the law. They're going to do it through their baptisms. And along the way, Paul gives the Galatians and all of us a really nice breakdown of what baptism does.

First, baptism unites us with Jesus. St. Paul writes that you were baptized "into Christ." This is just another way of saying you your life and Jesus's life have been bound together. That Jesus took on our life, living among us, dealing with the hopes and joys and perils of existence. And Jesus took on our own life even to the point of death. So there is no experience of life that you will ever have that God has not experienced already.

And Jesus takes on our life so that we can take on his life. So that the Jesus's righteousness, his relationship with God and others, is now given to us. Luther used to call this the "glorious exchange." That when we are baptized into Christ, everything

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that is ours becomes Christ's, and everything that is Christ's becomes ours. Life may be full of challenges and struggles and obstacles. But Jesus goes through it with us. God never promises us that that life will be easy, only that we'll never live it alone.

Second, baptism is a gift. Baptism is not a ritual that the bishop or I came up with on our own. Baptism is something God created for our sake. As you may remember from confirmation class, for something to be a sacrament, it has to have a promise, a tangible sign, and something instituted by Jesus. Something Jesus tells us to do. Something that has been given or gifted to us. God doesn't need baptism. But we do. And so God meets us where we are to bring us to faith.

But baptism is a gift in another, probably more important way, too. Because it's in our baptisms that we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Of course, the Holy Spirit works in our lives before we're baptized, but in our baptisms God pours out the love of Christ and seals it forever on our lives, helping us grow in faith and hope and love together. That isn't our own creation, but the grace of God overflowing into our lives.

And third, baptism creates a new social reality in the world. Today's reading contains a line that probably came from an early baptismal liturgy. St. Paul writes, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Those three distinctions were some of the most important in the Roman Empire. And they were not simply distinctions but hierarchies loaded up with power. In this community in Galatia, it is better to be a Jew than a Gentile, better to be free than enslaved, better to be male than female.

But the baptized community is organized differently. It doesn't have degrees of membership. It doesn't have premium baptism for the men and budget baptism package for the women. It doesn't have lavish communion meals for the rich and PB+J communion for the poor. There are no distinctions drawn within this community's liturgical praxis. That doesn't mean our identities, your own identities, don't matter. But it means that they never make you superior or inferior to anyone else. There are no right kinds of people or wrong kinds of people in the body of Christ, only baptized people.

This whole argument may feel very far removed from us, but you don't have to work too hard to see some parallels. After all, the irony of this whole situation is that many of the believers in Galatia are trying to achieve what God's already given them. They're trying to become who God has already made them. And they're trying to build a community that God has already formed. For the Galatians and for us, the work of grace isn't about achieving our own salvation, but living as if what God says about us and one another in our baptisms is actually true. That we are all children of God through faith.

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