

First Presbyterian Church
Gal. 2:1-10, “Mission, Neighbors, and Nations”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 7/4/2021

You may have noticed that this is the 4th of July.

We associate this day with the United States declaring independence from Britain,
and celebrate the establishment of a democracy of the people, by the people,
and for the people of this nation.

Because of this day, our laws are not handed down by a monarch or dictator,
but rather are wrestled over by three branches of government consisting
of representatives who have been elected to their office.

And dang it if I don't think some of the laws are bad,
and some elected officials lack common sense & decency,
but it's better than being under the thumb of a dictator.

This day represents a powerful idea, and is rightly celebrated in our country.
It's an idea that has been shown to bring about justice, fairness, freedom,
and which promotes human flourishing
around the world where democracy is practiced in many forms.

Because is such a good idea and such a powerful day,
Christians – who believe that God also promotes justice, fairness, freedom,
and human flourishing – tend to associate positively with this day.

And that's good! Christians should celebrate the 4th of July
and the birth of modern democracy.

The USA is 245 years old today, and next week our congregation
will turn 170 years old. Not bad!

At the same time, we should have a clear sense of how the mission of God
in Jesus Christ is distinct from these ideals of the United States.

We need to recognize the importance of not identifying too closely
the things of God and the things of our country.

As the body of Christ called by Jesus' great commission
to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to obey;
as those who follow Jesus' reconciling, bridge-building
pattern of being a neighbor to those who are different from us,
keeping these things distinct is essential.

When Christians conflate the mission of God with the mission of their country,
history shows that the church becomes a tool of the surrounding culture,
and the liberating Spirit of God becomes a slave
to the spirit of the nation. REPEAT.

The challenge for us today is to consider:

Where has our ethnic, cultural, and national identity been reoriented
by the spirit of God?

Where has our faith been reoriented by our earthly attachments
toward the spirit of our nation?

All of this is seen in the experience of the Apostle Paul
while he was leading missionary efforts around the Mediterranean Sea,
while also trying to maintain connection
with the church in Jerusalem.

Our reading from chapter 2 lands us in the middle of a story
in which Paul is telling the Galatian church about his
efforts to become an accepted authority
within the church at Jerusalem.

The Jerusalem church was, of course, very Jewish!

They believe in Jesus as he Messiah, but also continued to live and worship
as Jews, which was only right and proper for them to do.

Afterall, Jesus was Jewish!

So they were skeptical of some of the stories of Paul's efforts
in places like Galatia.

Some people thought these Gentiles who follow the Jewish Messiah
should also adopt Jewish practices –
symbolized most prominently by circumcision.

A deeper look at the situation described by Paul reveals
that the people who wanted Gentile Christians to be circumcised
(known as “the Judaizers”),
were not merely concerned with theology.

There was also a cultural/political component to their error that Paul was resisting.

Paul reveals the other dimension in the way he tells his story.

- vs. 1 “I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. *I took Titus along also.*”
- vs. 2 Paul sets before the leaders in Jerusalem the gospel that he wants to preach among *the Gentiles*.
- vs. 3 “Not even Titus was compelled to be circumcised, *even though he was a Greek.*”

In this story, Paul is demonstrating what real freedom in Christ is.

True freedom is not just “doing what you want or feel like doing”
but the ability to do what you know is right,
even when it pushes against the expectations of others.

The church in Jerusalem knew *intellectually*

that the mission of God would extend the Gospel to all nations.

But they still felt a little uncomfortable about these Gentiles
taking too much of their own direction in things.

They are, after all, Gentiles. Jerusalem is used to being the center of things,
and now all the growth and development is happening...out there?
Among those people? What about God’s promises to Israel?

This was not just *theology*, this was *sociology*.

To be blunt, Paul was engaging in a confrontation about
racism & nationalism in the church,
and the impact those things were having on Paul’s mission
to the Gentiles.

Scott McKnight explains it this way in the introduction to his commentary on Galatians:

“The argument of Paul gains a racial-social nuance and not just a theological one.

In contesting Judaizers, Paul is contesting not just theological variation but theology that serves social and racial interests.

The Judaizers were not simply converting others; they were nationalizing others.

Paul was also opposed to what we now call cultural imperialism (the view that one culture is superior to another).”

...

By contrast, Paul is working to create space in new faith communities for other cultures to follow Jesus without forcing them to adopt all the trappings of Jewish culture—even if those things are perfectly wonderful for Jews to celebrate and practice.

He especially desires for Jews and Gentiles who live in these countries to be joined together as one people of God reconciled in Christ.

To demonstrate this, Paul brought along Titus.

Now Titus was an up-and-coming Greek Christian young man associated with Paul, who was under intense pressure by Judaizers to be circumcised. Even so, he didn't give in.

Freedom in Christ only takes hold in our real lives when we believe deep down that God not only loves us, he likes us, accepts us as we are, and cheers for us to cast off everything that hinders us.

If Titus had taken on the national identity of Israel, he wouldn't have been free in Christ, and the mission of God would have been distorted.

Succumbing to the goal of the Judaizers
would not have benefited the spirituality of Titus,
nor would it have empowered the Greek church,
nor would it have created reconciliation
between Jews & Greeks.
Assimilation is not reconciliation.

Paul and Titus refuse to allow Titus to be nationalized by theology
tilted toward one nation over others.
In other words, a nationalizing spirituality is not in line
with the Mission of God. REPEAT

So as we celebrate the 4th of July and blow things up
for the birthday of modern democracy,
we should ask ourselves,
“To what degree has our mission to all nations become *nationalized* by the USA?”

The presence of these two flags represent symbolic nationalization of our faith.
The American flag, obviously, indicates a connection between
our local church and the nation it resides within.
It is red, white, and blue with a gold fringe around it.

The Christian flag, first created in New York in 1897,
indicates ... I suppose that we're Christian.
To be honest with you, I don't know what the purpose of this flag is,
but it, too, is red, white, and blue with a gold fringe around it.

If this flag symbolizes Christianity around the world,
isn't a little odd that it was both designed by a US citizen
and is made in the colors of the US flag?
Does this flag say, “Make disciples of all nations” to you?

For myself, these flags placed near to each other convey the message
of a dual commitment to “God and country.”

But “God and country” isn’t the gospel! American exceptionalism isn’t the gospel.
In fact, they run counter to Jesus’ call to love those who are different
and make disciples across boundaries of race, culture,
gender, and social classes.

Listen to this commentary by Paul Dietterich of the Center for Parish Studies
in his book, “Foretaste: Leadership for the Missional Church”:

“Most North American congregations are captives of the dominant secular culture.
Culture-bound, they tend to reflect our culture rather than challenge it.
They use cultural methods of decision making, politicizing issues,
sharing power, raising money, governing themselves.
They are not aware of the extent to which they are in bondage to
and a reflection of their dominant culture.”

Now that is exactly what the Apostle Paul is arguing to the Galatians.
He says in v. 4, “This matter [the circumcision of Titus] arose
because some false believers had infiltrated our ranks to spy
on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves.”

So the church is not to conform to the pressure of others
to look like them or act like them, and when the church engages in mission
it shouldn’t apply that kind of pressure on others, either!

Sadly, much of the mission activity emerging from the US has (unintentionally)
served to form others in our own likeness
rather than in the likeness of Christ.

By contrast, when the Mission of God goes out with the meekness and humility
of Christ, and encourages the freedom of Christ,
it stands in contrast to the emphasis of consumerism, manipulation,
escape, money, antagonism, and power
that we see in the world around us.

Listen again to Dietterich who writes,

“In contrast, a missional church knows that it is called
to demonstrate a different way to be a society.

A missional church is sent into the world to be a foretaste of life in God’s reign.

‘It is recognizable as a foretaste of the blessing which God intends
for the whole human family.’”

As I said at the beginning, the challenge for us today is to consider:

Where has our ethnic, cultural, and national identity been reoriented
by the Spirit of God?

Where has our faith been reoriented by our earthly attachments
toward the spirit of our nation?

The Church of Jesus Christ is given power

by the Spirit of the Living God to have freedom and be distinct.

When we live in this freedom, Jesus has not promised that our nation

will be the wealthiest, strongest, or most powerful,

but rather that the gates of hell will not prevail
against God’s purposes for us.

Let us ask the Spirit (on this day especially!)

to turn our hearts toward the things of God’s kingdom,

to see more clearly the things that belong

to the kingdoms of this world,

and to practice our freedom in Christ

in such a way that the world can tell the difference.