

Galatians 5:1, 5-6, 13-15 ~ Luke 4:16-21

Live into Hope: Compassion to Action

8th Sunday after Pentecost ~ Youth Mission Trip Commissioning ~ July 14, 2024

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Scripture Lesson:

A good friend (and Ruling Elder) from a former congregation, recalled a fond memory about something her beloved husband would say to her. She shared this memory when we were gathered in her living room for a family meeting a few days after he had died. They lived very near a golf course where in retirement, he enjoyed spending most afternoons playing a round of golf or two. She shared with a wry smile and a glimmer in her eyes, that he would often call her when he was close to the final hole and say, "Honey, time to get the argument started, I'll be home in twenty minutes."

Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia, that Linda read for our first scripture lesson, reminds me of this story because reading this letter helicopters us into an argument already well underway. Paul wrote Galatians, in part, because he was boiling mad at them. The book of Galatians is not as much a theological treatise as it is an urgent, pastoral letter to a cluster of churches in a moment of crisis. Yes: even the earliest of churches, (this was written about 50 CE) threatening to fall apart because of divisions. Arguing. Churches arguing? Imagine that...

Lucky for us, we actually get the whole point of his letter distilled down to a single verse in Gal. 5:1, *For freedom Christ has set us free*. But free from what? Free from the entanglements of bloodless legalism. And free *for* what? Free to really love our neighbor as ourselves. Paul is proclaiming to the Galatians who were wrangling about doctrine and dogmas, arguing about who's in and who's out: "Listen people: *the only thing that counts is faith working through love.*" (Galatians 5:6b)

Having just spent the better part of 9 days as a Teaching Elder Commissioner to General Assembly from our Winnebago Presbytery, first in all day committee meetings on Zoom and then in twelve-hour plenary sessions in person with over 600 hundred people, at the Salt Palace in Salt Lake City: I have good news. Faith working through love, *really works!* And it is work. And yes, you might say much of our best work, our most important work of spiritual discernment worked through, "arguing..." In a decent and orderly way, of course.

We Presbyterians believe the Holy Spirit anoints *everyone*, no matter how divergent, with the right to be heard and seen and honored. Because every person is made in God's image and gifted by God with their own unique light and wisdom to share. We put this theology in practice (and to the test) at General Assembly through a process where people request to be recognized, cue up at the microphones, and when granted their chance, speak in favor of or in opposition to, each motion brought before the body. Or they amend the motion. Or ask a question. The first two days everyone was limited to 2 minutes. The third day a person proposed limiting each person's mic time to 1 minute. This passed overwhelmingly. It's amazing how much content and passion can be expressed in 1 minute!

Faith working through love takes time and patience. One motion, from the Environmental Justice Committee regarding divesting from fossil fuel companies, after three hours of deliberation that ended by passing with a vote before dinner. We thought we were done. But no. This "argument" was *not* over. After dinner one commissioner made a "motion to reconsider" which won, 284/130. And we were back into it *again*. (I will save the fascinating twists and turns of this debate, where it landed, and how we got there for my Forum.)

Getting back to the gospel thread from GA to Paul to Jesus: Neither Paul *nor* Jesus shied away from a healthy debate or conflict. Sometimes, Jesus even provoked them. Like in Luke 4, our second scripture lesson this morning which I *am* about to read. This juicy text contains the very first words that grown-up Jesus spoke to humans in the gospel of Luke. Yet, he begins with the continuation of an ongoing argument embedded in his Jewish faith. Yes, an argument already underway. Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah, words originally written to address God's chosen people upon their return to Judah from Exile back in 520-515 BCE; (Isaiah 61:1-2). Words calling them to reclaim their core identity: as a people called to compassion to action for those on the edge, the underdogs and the overwhelmed.

Although we end today's reading ends on the up note: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." In the context of *Jesus as instigator of important arguments*, I will remind you of what happened next. At first they are all thrilled. "Wow, look at our hometown boy now! And just to think we are in the room where it happened!" Until... he explains that this call for compassion to action doesn't privilege them in any way. So they get very angry very quickly, so angry they try to hurl him off a cliff (Luke 4:29). And you wonder why some preachers (especially those with sanctuaries perched on the side of a hill) hesitate to offer sermon talk-back sessions.

Now you are ready, perhaps more than ready, to hear from Luke 4:16-21, the story of Jesus' first day in the synagogue in Nazareth.

Sermon:

I will begin with a story about two kites. Dr. Jerry Pillay, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC) opened his sermon at our ecumenical service at the General Assembly morning session with this story. It goes like this: Once there were two kites. Of course, each was tied to a string and controlled by a person on the ground. One of the kites wished fervently to be set free. It imagined how grand it would be to fly free. To fly as high or as fast as its heart desired. And one day, this wish was granted! For a moment this feeling of freedom for the kite was exhilarating, but then all too soon, it got stuck on some wires. Instead of being free and happy, it was hopelessly entangled and far from its friend.ⁱ

Now the kite just longed to be unstuck from the wires and back with its friend again. After several days, a strong wind blew it down, and it was found and repaired, after at last this kite got to be together with its long-lost friend. "I never want to let loose of this string again; this is my freedom." What can we learn from this story? Let's face it: We are all tied to something

or someone, Beloved Community. As Bob Dylan's 1979 song from his "Slow Train Coming" album puts it, "You're gonna have to serve somebody... Well, it may be the Devil and it may be the Lord, but you're gonna have to serve somebody." We are all slaves to something. It could be our stuff, our reputation, our need for control.

Who or what is holding your kite string? If we choose to be connected to Christ, we stay grounded in hope, let come what may. Hope that holds us to the power of faith working through love. As Dr. Pillay put it: Hope "is not some shoddy sensational feeling, a romantic gesture or a shallow experience. Instead, it is grounded in the historical suffering, death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord, Jesus Christ. This hope is real and now, even though it is something of the future." (See first footnote.)

In this hope, whether the problem is between two people, two groups who oppose one another, or two political entities, such as colonizers and the colonized, Jesus shows us the truth. People on both sides of an argument seek to be humanized and harmonized. This is the way God has hard wired us deep down, below our differences. The one who is the parent of us all. The who shows us and teaches us how to love and to forgive.

Friends, the spirit of the Lord is upon you, and me and us: we have been anointed to continue Christ's liberating work. It takes time, and patience. It takes faith, working together through love. Sometimes, yes, through arguing, through difficult conversations that yield new ways of thinking and being and doing. This is a challenging message for me. I don't like to argue. It makes me uncomfortable. My first response is to avoid them. Maybe it is for you, too. And yet, I realize, many of the hardest conversations in my life have grown me the most. Thank you, Jesus!

Who among us feels fully prepared, equipped, and ready? Up to the task. As we work together this summer to clarify our call to be a Matthew 25 church, we likely feel unprepared. I am guessing that our youth we are about to commission on their mission trip (and their adult leaders) may feel unprepared. As we make plans for and volunteer to help with Vacation Bible School this summer, we may wonder how we can make a difference for Christ in the lives of the young people whom God calls to us. Fear not. *"God does not call the prepared. God prepares those whom God calls."*

This is good news, I think. *Whatever* you may be facing right now, that feels like too much. Or too hard. Something you feel so unready to handle. Christ is with you in the struggle. Or are you feeling tangled up in wire, having flown free for awhile, but then crashed and burned? Maybe you are having an argument with God. Go ahead and make it. God can take it. Think for a moment as we near the end of this sermon: Who is really flying *your* kite? Jesus stands ready to take your kite and launch you again and again. Friends, let us live into this hope, opening our hearts to whatever beginning you may be longing for, (ready and prepared or not). I will close with a part of the prayer by Ted Loder titled, "Help Me to Believe in Beginnings." Let us pray:

God of history and of my heart...

Help me to make beginnings:

*to begin going out of my weary mind
into fresh dreams,
daring to make my own bold tracks
in the land of now;*

*to begin forgiving
that I may experience mercy;
to begin questioning the unquestionable
that I may know truth;
to begin sacrificing
that I may accomplish justice;
to begin risking
that I may make peace;
to begin loving
that I may realize joy.*

*Help me to be a beginning for others,
to be a singer for the songless,
a befriender of the friendless;
to become a beginning of hope for the despairing,
of assurance for the doubting,
of reconciliation for the divided;
to become a beginning of freedom for the oppressed,
of comfort for the sorrowing,
of friendship for the forgotten;
to become a beginning of sweetness for the soured,
of gentleness for the angry,
of wholeness for the broken,
of peace for the frightened and violent of the earth.*

*Help me to believe in beginnings,
to make a beginning,
to be a beginning,
so that I may not just grow old,
but grow new
each day of this wild, amazing life
you call me to live with the passion of Jesus Christ.ⁱⁱ Amen.*

ⁱ <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2024/7/2/ecumenical-worship-opens-general-assembly-on-tuesd/>

ⁱⁱ Ted Loder, *Guerrillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle*, from "Help Me to Believe in Beginnings," (LuraMedia: San Diego, CA, 1984) pp. 98-99.