

“...let us work for the good of all...”

Reading from the Old Testament: Proverbs 11:2, 6, 9, 12, 17

Reading from the New Testament: Galatians 6:1-10

So, it's been a while. Our sabbatical adventures have taken us from St. Louis to Washington D.C to San Francisco, Carmel, Yosemite, and Boone. What a priceless privilege it has been, and yet it is always good to come home, and when I say home, I am not just speaking about the welcome confines and comforts of our house. I am also talking about this place and that means you. Today, for me, is confirmation that there is a reason our website is identified as smpchome. It is good to be home.

Last week we were in Utah, nestled in that stunningly scenic valley between the Wasatch and Oquirrh mountains. We were there to visit our older son and soon-to-be daughter-in-law. While in Salt Lake City, and as a combination celebration of Mother's and Father's Day, they wanted to treat us to an evening at this elegant restaurant up in Little Cottonwood Canyon. Just the drive up there was a crane-your-neck sightseer's dream. Stunning! But just as we pulled up to the restaurant, the clouds burst like water balloons, releasing a torrent of biblical proportion ... and the raincoat I had so meticulously packed was

back in the hotel room. I ran up the hill as fast as my 61-year-old legs would take me, but I was drenched, like ice-bucket challenge drenched.

So, I found myself sitting in this classic urbane dining room, suppressing the urge to strip down and wring out my clothes. I knew it would be futile to look for a hand dryer in the restroom (the xelerator!), because this was not that kind of restaurant. This was the kind of place outfitted with those thick, tastefully embossed and folded towelettes, you know, the classy stuff that in this moment would do me absolutely no good. And there's nothin' like sittin' under an air conditioner vent in wet clothes.

Nevertheless, it didn't manage to dampen the evening (hardee, har, har). The food was sumptuous and the fellowship divine. I mention it because that image of wringing soaked fabric came to mind as I thought about life in Galatia. Hear me out; that image – twisting, squeezing, wringing – you know that image. Be it a dripping shirt, a soaked chamois cloth, or a waterlogged dish towel, you can picture that image. You certainly have experience twisting and wrenching some piece of fabric to drain the liquid out of it. Even the aristocrat who pays someone else to do the wringing can picture the process.

Twisting and wrenching, squeezing and wringing. In fact, I'd wager that not only can you picture this process of wringing and twisting, tighter and tighter, you can feel it, too. You know what I'm talking about. After an abysmal half, the team walks warily into the locker room knowing that a storm is coming. The veins look like flaming pool noodles popping out the side of the coach's neck. The kraken's about to be let loose, and your stomach is spontaneously wringing and twisting, but there's no escape. Inevitably, the raging coach is going to spew his fury toward you. You can feel it ... right here in the gut. Squeezing. Wringing. Twisting. Wrenching.

You pull into the parking lot and can feel it even before you enter the building of Dysfunction Junction, Incorporated. Your business casual threads mask the tumult in your tummy ... squeezing, wringing. The air is heavy with the tension of office politics – the turf wars, the cloistered whispering, the passive aggressive silences, power plays, sniping, and complaining. You're thinking you'd be better off with Michael, Phyliss, and Dwight over at Dunder Mifflin. Every morning you have to swallow the dread and enter the asylum. Your calendar is chock full of those *I'd-rather-take-a-beating* meetings. An abdominal x-

ray would reveal a rope-making machine – twisting, wringing ... tighter and tighter. Thank God for Tums.

You can feel it. For others, it's going home that drives the dread. I read a *Sports Illustrated* article this week about surfing legend Kelly Slater. He began surfing as a boy in Cocoa Beach, Florida, "the waves offering escape from a turbulent home, elements of which he says shaped him into a 'competitive beast.' A father who struggled with alcoholism; a funny but, Kelly says, often harsh mother; an angry older brother." Slater remembers thinking, "If I win, it'll fix stuff." You read this and you can feel it; the anxious child weary of conflict; the twisting, wringing anxiety, constantly fearing, not if, but when the next volcano will erupt, spewing the molten lava of fury, bitterness, hate language, jealousy, resentment, and far too often, abuse. You can feel it.

Well, welcome to First Church, Galatia. Paul's letter to this fledgling church in what is now Turkey was written some 25 years after Christ's resurrection and some 15 to 20 years before any of the Gospels, and well, let's just say that congregational life isn't going so well. There is conflict, there are accusations, people are giving one another the cold shoulder, silent before their opponents and self-righteously verbose

behind their backs. There is a lot of indigestion. There are factions and a big ol' dispute over what is required to be an *authentic* Christian.

Authentic. My wife Donna hates that word, particularly in regard to faith or who is Christian, and I agree (*I've always found that to be a wise policy*). *Authentic*, as if anybody on this side of the pearly gates has any standing to make that determination, as if there is a password that lets you into the club, a litmus test that confirms your bona fides, a rush chairman who has the power to say whether you make the grade.

In Galatia, the litmus test of authenticity was circumcision, and I just don't know how they thought they were going to make that sound attractive in the church brochure. Can't you see some visitor chatting up a church member at Galatia's Lemonade on the Lawn?

"So, we really like what we're hearing in worship here. Is there anyone I need to meet with, or anything I need to do to join your congregation?"

"Well, tell me a little bit about your pain threshold." And he pulls a surgical scalpel out of his coat pocket.

When Paul hears about all the fussing, arguing, finger-pointing, stubbornness and well, childishness going on in Galatia, he was probably thinking he would have been better off just sticking with tentmaking. *I shoulda gone to trade school.* But Paul, being Paul, writes a letter ... and he's so ticked that, unlike his other letters, Paul doesn't waste any words buttering the Galatians up with compliments and expressions of gratitude. There is no mincing of words here. "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to another gospel."

Paul is all keyed up because he sees the Galatian church retreating from a grace focused gospel, and instead following the influence of self-righteous, power seeking, agenda driven voices and their litmus tests of Christian authenticity.

You can understand his frustration, because in some ways doesn't it seem that American Christianity has similarly lost its way? Listening to the folks with the loudest megaphones across the political and cultural minefield, you couldn't blame an outside observer for assuming that Jesus was out there packing some heat, all locked and loaded, arresting unwed mothers, or canceling anyone who hurt his feelings,

demonizing those who deign to disagree, screaming face to face at the trending protest, and funding attack ads for the next campaign, all in the name of authentic Christianity, whatever that means.

You know that's not who Jesus is. That's not the Jesus who gave us the beatitudes, fed the 5,000, lauded the Good Samaritan, touched the leper, and shared a cup with the ostracized woman at the well.

You can understand Paul's frustration here, and I hope that we too can feel it. But I also hope we can see that Paul's frustration isn't a dead end here. Understanding the grace of Jesus Christ, Paul allows that frustration to be transformed into tools for reconciliation. He doesn't throw his hands up, dismissive of any hope for Christ's church. No, through the grace of Jesus Christ, he envisions a grace-infused way to be the church, modeling what it looks like to live in community as Christ's disciples.

Knowing that where 2 or 3 are gathered there are at least fifty opinions, Paul highlights the care the church must take to navigate our differences. "If anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.

Take care that you yourselves are not tempted ... ³ For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves.” ... Didn't IceCube say the same thing? “You better check yo' self before you wreck yo' self.” Truth! Before you drill down on the faults, stupidity, and transgressions of others, you have a whole lot of housecleaning in your own spirit and character to address.

Paul goes so far as to indicate that if you focus appropriate attention on the areas that need work within you, you won't have time to obsess over what is wrong with everybody else. He says, “All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. For all must carry their own loads.”

Sports often bring out the worst in the self-identified fan with the replica game jersey, the fan whose cheering is miniscule compared to the carping, taunting, and shouting, as if they always know better, see better, use better judgment from their vantage point in the luxury boxes and cheap seats and the family room couch. Does anyone remember Kareem Abdul Jabbar's cameo as an airline pilot in the clownish movie, *Airplane?* He says he is Roger Murdock, the co-pilot, but little Joey knows better. “I've seen you play. My dad has season tickets ... I think

you're the greatest, but my dad says you don't work hard enough on defense, and he says that lots of times you don't even run down the court, and that you don't really try, except during the playoffs."

With that, Jabbar breaks character, grabbing the kid by the collar, saying, "Listen kid, I've been hearing that crap since I was at UCLA. I'm out there busting my buns every night. Tell your old man to drag Walton and Lanier up and down the court for 48 minutes." In other words, Kareem, like Paul, is advising Joey's dad and us, "You better check yo' self before you wreck yo' self."

For you reap what you sow. Paul's not talking here about punching your ticket for heaven. He's just referring to the reality that actions have natural implications and consequences that follow from them. Hosea the prophet knew this. He reminded Israel's straying leaders and citizens that if the farmer sows nothing but wind, he will only reap the whirlwind. The prophet Ezekiel warned of the same reality, "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." "You better check yo' self before you wreck yo' self."

Paul recenters the church on what makes for health in community. “⁹ So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up ... whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all and especially for those of the family of faith.”

When we confess that we are sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving God’s displeasure and without hope except in Christ’s sovereign mercy, we are confessing that our minds are finite, and our judgments are flawed, both being clouded by self-interest. So, we are rarely completely right, and “they” are rarely completely wrong.

Barbara Brown Taylor remembers an encounter with the young man working the check-out line at the grocery store. He asked, “They say that marriage is all about compromise. Is that true?” She surely didn’t know what inspired that question, but after a moment, she answered, “Yes, it’s true.” And with a sigh, the young man said, “I was afraid you were going to say that.”

Remember, in any relationship, you are rarely righteous, and they are rarely reprobate. Compassion. Empathy. Cooperation. Mercy.

Humility. Forbearance. Gentleness. May our witness and the world's impression of the word Christian spring from these words. Malevolence will never get us there, but grace will always bring us home. Amen.