

Division

Galatians 3:23-29

The Apostle Paul wrote our verses today at the end of an extended argument for the supremacy of faith over law. In the early church the place of the Jewish law in the Christian life was *the* hottest issue. “Law” here refers to the laws God gave to the people of Israel, primarily through Moses. Jesus, a Jew, said he came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. Yet as he did with many of the facets of Judaism, he radically reinterpreted the law's meaning and purpose. Paul struggled with this for as long as he performed his missionary work.

Paul tells us God's law was once a disciplinarian. It rewarded obedient, and penalized disobedient, behavior. It also formed the backbone of the covenant and became the sole means for a Jew to stay in a right relationship with God. But once Jesus came the law served solely to inform us of right from wrong. Now, Paul writes, faith has taken precedence. He writes of both “faith” and “the faith”. By “faith” he means believing that Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior. By “the faith” he means Christianity. He cares far more about faith without the definite article. He makes this central point in Galatians 3:26: “for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.” Our purpose becomes having that faith that saves.

Paul adds a critical result of Jesus followers having obtained saving faith: it

produces unity. Communion. In words radical for their time almost beyond modern understanding, he adds, “There is no longer Jew or Greek...slave or free...male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” From this passage we learn three points: the role of God's law is to teach us the difference between right and wrong, faith saves us, and faith unites us in Christ. All three points apply to what has happened in the United State of America in the year 2020.

The current situation has many moving parts. It features a shifting, sometimes obscure cast of characters. It has roots in centuries of oppression and in the cultural divide that has opened into a canyon. Its actors have different political and spiritual understandings. But honestly, it is not difficult to understand what is happening.

We start with human nature. I do not subscribe to all of John Calvin's teachings. I find some of his thinking too judgmental, some of his ideas about how church and society ought to be structured graceless and totalitarian. But I feel he got a number of things exactly right. One of those things is his understanding of human nature. As Calvin wrote in his Institutes of the Christian Religion, “I find that (humanity) is a confounding mixture of good and evil, containing a reflection of the glory of God and also of the demonic nature of the Enemy.” We are angels and we are sinners. In the current crisis we see both in abundance. But at its core, this crisis is the result of a virus and sin. The institutionalized sin of racism. Also the sins of duplicity, selfishness and rage. We have been—and in many places still are—trapped in isolation for fear of the virus. Our ability to act on our better angels has eroded. We're exhausted. We're

afraid. We're angry. And we're sinners by nature.

The next clear truth is that three groups of people with long-nurtured grievances have met in a three-sided collision. If the virus prepared the fire pit, a white cop murdering a black man put the match to it. The list of most recent racially-motivated killings got too long. African-Americans and those who genuinely sympathize with their grief had enough. They took to the streets. It seems hard to believe only about ten days later, but for a couple of days they protested peacefully. They marched. They screamed and chanted. They sat down in front of freeway traffic. But they were not setting fires or looting stores. I found their reaction perfectly legitimate.

But with the incredible speed of the digital age, here came the other two groups: the white nationalists and the radical anarchists. Seeing their chance, they took it. Using the cover of the Black Lives Matter demonstrations they did all in their power to blow the lid off our society. We do not, and may never, know their relative numbers. What we believe about that probably depends more than we would care to admit on where we get our news. I am simply describing the big picture. Hard left and hard right, we harbor in our culture large numbers of mostly younger people who do not want peace. They want to smash and burn, and many of them, to grab. For the most part they do not believe in God. They do not care about the law—God's law or the federal code. They find no sense of purpose in life. They have twisted ideas about our nation's history and its foundations. They hate each other with a passion that ought to make everybody else gasp for breath.

This is what is happening in America. Another chapter in the long, tragic saga of oppression of one race at the hand of another; plus the emergence from their slimy caves of extremists on both poles who want nothing less than to destroy our political and social institutions. Period. As a minister of the Gospel I feel compelled to call on all followers of Jesus to respond to these three groups of people in two ways. For the oppressed we must offer communion. For the extremists we must reject their ideas, beliefs and tactics. Each extremist side is equally loathsome, equally Loony Tunes, equally dangerous to our great, if flawed, nation. Eventually our political leaders will learn how to use the power of law enforcement to defeat them in the streets. In the meantime, we must refuse to countenance either of their evil ideologies.

The Apostle Paul, remember, offered three points in Galatians 3. The law of God now exists to show us the difference between good and evil; faith in Jesus as the Christ saves; and in the Body of Christ, those who in every time and place have that saving faith, we have unity. Each point contributes to how we must act today.

Most American laws can trace their heritage back to the Bible. The central principles of the Mosaic Law live on in our codes and ordinances. Those principles include equal justice for all, individual rights balanced against the good of society, and so forth. There can be no question that the Law of God also demands two reactions for these three groups of people out on our streets. For those protesting racism and police brutality, God's Law utterly supports their cause. It is right. It is just. It speaks to both individual rights and societal responsibilities. For as long as they state their

case non-violently they are square with God and God's Law. Had I known in advance of the demonstrations last Saturday in Terre Haute I might have joined one.

For those seeking to use violence to smash and burn and grab, God's Law rejects their ideas and actions. God's Law states that human beings are created in the image of God. Our lives are grounded in the Holy. Life itself is to be revered, not worshiped (worship belongs alone to God), but treasured and protected. Violence against people breaks both God's and humanity's laws. Violence against property is also proscribed by God's law. I could go on; the point has been made. ***No ideology or political philosophy can justify these evil actions.*** Besides, as Timothy Sample, my professor of philosophy at IU, put it, "The longer it takes to explain yourself, the less likely you are to be speaking truth."

Paul's second point, that faith in Christ saves, also applies to the present crisis. I stated before that many of the extremists do not believe in God. Even the white nationalists, whose trucks often bear God and guns bumper stickers, believe in no God I recognize. Hard left and hard right, they have no sense of meaning for their lives. They do not know it, but they are seeking to fill this cavernous gap in their souls with whichever cause they support. ***They cannot do it.*** Jesus preached about trying to put out the light with darkness. And as John the Gospel writer so eloquently put it, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot put it out."

Finally, Paul points out that all who share faith in Christ Jesus have unity. My

friends, this is the point of this sermon: Let your faith lead you into solidarity with all people seeking to follow the Light. Across racial, economic and all other barriers, find your unity with others who believe in and seek to obey Jesus. When asked what the greatest of all laws was, he said to love God and love your neighbor. When a wag in the crowd demanded that he define “neighbor” he told the Parable of the Good Samaritan. That is, he insisted that a member of the Jews' most-despised rival ethnic group deserved their love.

A white young woman of my acquaintance has mentored an African-American girl for maybe five years. This is no superficial, minimum-effort relationship; the young woman has intentionally taken on the role of an older sister for a girl who does not know whether her biological parents are alive. This both impresses and shames me. In a halfhearted way I hoped I might have a decent relationship with the African-American boy I mentored in Kid's Hope. But now even that has been taken away, at least temporarily. I ask you to join me then in responding to the current crisis as a true follower of Jesus. Reject the extremists. But also, seek to create communion with the oppressed. Most of them are Jesus followers too. Do you suppose he sees them as anything less than us? Let your faith create communion with them. I believe they will gladly accept any sincere attempt to do so. Doing so squares us with God's Law, expresses our faith and makes reconciliation between the races possible.

Have faith. Seek communion. Reject hate. Follow Jesus.