

Text: Galatians 1: 11-24

Title: Speaking Presbyterian: The Experience of Election

Date: June 6, 2010

Welcome to the first Sunday of an intermittent sermon series that I am calling Speaking Presbyterian. For as long as I have been alive we Presbyterians have for so many years stressed ecumenical cooperation, saying that we are basically the same as other denominations. And while we all affirm basic Christian doctrines- Like Jesus being fully human and fully divine and having died for our sins, that our status before God is based on Faith in God's grace - we say those things with a particular accent. Presbyterian is more than a way we organize and govern a church- there is a Presbyterian ethos that stresses dialogue, debate and mutual respect. But we are also heirs to the Reformed tradition, that wing of the Reformation that came out of Switzerland as articulated by John Calvin.

Calvin - Say the word Calvin and in some circles that conjures up images of a hawk faced, rigid, my way or no way kind of guy. And while that is blatantly unfair, much of that reputation comes from the debates over election, what became known as predestination; the notion that from God has chosen us from the beginning of time. In typical zero-sum thinking that means that God must have chosen others to be damned from the beginning of time. Talk about asking the wrong question and getting the wrong answer! Does this make sense to anyone? Granted, Calvin lived in black and white times, and to me fair much of the debate has been carried on by hyper Calvinists- I wonder if even Calvin would recognize their arguments.

Here's the problem- when we make the conversation about who gets in or out, we focus on who gets left out, not even bothering to note that this is all OUR projection. Last time I looked no one died and made us God. Even worse, in a self righteous way we lose sight of our own experience. The Gospel is all about our experience of forgiveness, spiritual growth and extending God's love to others. We Presbyterians don't spend a lot of time damning anyone!

That being said- election is a huge deal for us, the experience of being chosen by God. Paul is going to help us in this. Galatians was written before Romans, before the

rest of the church figured out that this guy Paul was on to something. In fact there were those in the Christian establishment that were definitely anti Paul. Paul is defending himself to the Galatians saying, Look, I didn't make this up! This was revealed to me- God gave me a revelation and that revelation was Jesus Christ! What follows is the story that we recognize as Paul's Damascus road experience.

Take another look- Do you see the words Damascus road anywhere here? We recognize this because we've read Luke's account in Acts- but Acts hasn't been written yet! In fact this reads far more like the calling of Isaiah or Jeremiah; the focus here is on God's actions, and not ours. Paul is persecuting the Church- and God puts a stop to it!

More than that, Paul is defending his apostleship. More than just being the source of Paul's gospel, God is the one who created Paul for just this purpose. Before Paul was born God put him aside to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul's understanding of God's grace is proactive. God's grace is not just available- it seeks out and frees one from the destructive cycle of sin. Only by the intervention of God's grace could have transformed Paul, from being a persecutor of the Church to being embraced by God and entrusted with the mission to the Gentiles. Paul's experience is summed up in one word: ELECTION

What's more, this is not just a one shot deal. Paul wants the Galatians to understand that his experience is normal. Election is not about who get into heaven, it is about being set aside on earth for heavenly purposes. The beauty is all of this is that it is God doing the electing, God doing the revealing, God doing the empowering. Calvin wanted his readers to understand that their status in heaven was assured, that they need not worry if they could loose their salvation, so to speak. Since election is God's doing, then all we need do is to be faithful to the purpose that we were set aside for.

Come to think of it, one can almost define church history by the injustices that God's people have stood against. More than one historian has pointed out that the First Great Awakening that started in American churches, emphasizing an individual experience of God's election laid the moral groundwork for the American Revolution. In the same way, the Second Great Awakening that started in the 1800's spawned the Abolitionist movement that gave the moral reason for the Civil War. It is no accident that the Churches were the backbone of the Civil rights movement.

So what is the injustice, the moral cancer that we in our time are called to stand against? There is no shortage of candidates out there: the normalization of pornography, the existence of almost a permanent underclass, desensitization to violence, rampant materialism. I am sure you too could come up with a list without really working at it- there is so much to do.

But I think that at the root of much of the ills we face is the experience of isolation, being cut off from those around us. By and large we humans are social creatures, bad things happen when we are cut off from one another. Without others to encourage us, we experience disempowerment and failure. Without others to check our thinking, it is very easy to get sucked into the extremist ideologies- Ask any American terrorist. Without others to remind us that our moral decisions affect people far beyond ourselves- our impulses can spiral out of control. We are living amid a perfect storm in which our technology, the acid nature of our politics and the breakdown of our community building groups have put us in a place where isolation is the cancer on the American soul.

So what to do? Churches are made to order for building community. Here is where people who do not work together, live together or are otherwise related to one another come to experience the same Grace in Christ that Paul experienced. We take this for granted, for we are used to coming together to love and encourage one another through all of life's blessings and challenges. But what would it be like if there was no church family, no group of people who loved you for simply being the person that God created you to be?

But building community is not limited to these walls- but I am not telling you anything that you do not already know. There are all sorts of people who need us to care for them. If we understand ourselves as God's Elect, then perhaps we better get handles on What God has set us aside for. Perhaps a better word would be DRAFTED.

Understanding God's actions as the basis of election also serves as the basis for our understanding of the sacraments. When we baptize a child or an adult we are saying "Yes!" to what God has already done, bringing this person into the Kingdom of God and membership in God's set aside people. When we celebrate communion, we serve one another, and thus fulfill Jesus' command to love each other as He has loved

us. We recognize that Jesus instituted the New Covenant, based not on our actions on God's behalf, but on God's actions on our behalf. We too can say with Paul that the Gospel we proclaim is not of human origin – for we too have received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. Let us too take up the task that God has set us aside to do with the same vigor

Let us pray.