

“Later, when Peter came to Antioch, I had a face-to-face confrontation with him because he was clearly out of line.” Can you imagine what that confrontation with Peter might have been like? The early church’s top two leaders are in conflict, in public, and here, we have Paul’s version of the argument. It’s interesting to me that we only have Paul’s version of the story. We only have Paul’s perspective. We only see it through Paul’s filter. But let’s consider both guys.

Peter is one of the first disciples Jesus called. He was a fisherman, likely mid-career and likely illiterate. He was invited by a new charismatic leader from Nazareth to join him on a journey of taking a new perspective of the Jewish tradition, out into the communities. And Jesus took him to all sorts of places. Peter would have watched the confrontations with the Jewish authorities. On a different day, Peter might have just as likely been one in the crowd wielding a heavy stone when Jesus said of the woman, “let the one who is without sin cast the first stone.” Peter would have been just as dumbfounded, when he heard Jesus say “has no one condemned you? Then neither do I.”

Peter would have seen Jesus’ own complete about-face after the encounter with the Canaanite woman who demanded that Jesus heal her daughter. He would have seen the demons leave the tormented souls. And after Jesus sent him, Peter would have gone to the towns and villages where Jesus himself intended to go to bring healing and a word of the Kingdom of God coming near. Peter followed. He followed faithfully, I think with his mouth half open in stunned amazement.

Peter is the one who denied Jesus three times because he was terrified that if he were seen to be linked with Jesus he’d suffer the same humiliating fate. After all the events of Good Friday were over, Peter is the one who ended up returning to the Sea of Galilee to catch fish not knowing what else to do. And only when the risen Christ asked Peter three times if Peter loved him, and commanded Peter to feed his flock, did Peter return to the other disciples.

This is the Peter whom Paul confronted about bending to the pressures of the law by the demanding conservative fundamentalists. I love Eugene Peterson’s translation of this text. Here’s Paul’s controversy again. “Earlier, before certain persons had come from James, Peter regularly ate with the non-Jews. But when that conservative group came from Jerusalem, Peter cautiously pulled back and put as much distance as he

could manage between himself and his non-Jewish friends. That's how fearful he was of the conservative Jewish clique that's been pushing the old system of circumcision. Unfortunately, the rest of the Jews in the Antioch church joined in that hypocrisy so that even Barnabas was swept along in the charade."

Paul's pretty hard on Peter, given Peter's own filters. But the way I see it, Peter's behaviour seems completely consistent with our experience of him throughout the scriptures.

And what about Paul? He has a wholly different set of filters. Paul was wealthy by birth. He was trained as a Pharisee and completely steeped in the Jewish law. He knew it intimately. He understood and did perfectly what good Jews needed to do to be right with Yahweh God. In Galatians he writes "we had the best system of rules the world has ever seen!" But according to Paul's experience, he was consistently working harder, doing the same things, hoping for a different result. "I tried keeping rules and working my head off to please God and it didn't work."

I've said it a million times; we can't read a word of Paul without remembering his conversion experience on the Damascus Road. Paul says to the Galatians that he tried all he could to keep the law, in order to please God, but only a life changing conversion made him realize how misguided he was.

Paul was privileged and educated but it didn't make a whit of difference when it came to the grace of God. Likely Peter's only experience of the law was how Jesus interpreted it for him. I bet in this public confrontation Peter is completely over his head, embarrassed and uncertain about what to do next.

But before we're too hard on Paul, I think this passage helps us understand him completely, and by example calls us to live similar lives. "I quit being a "law man." Christ's life showed me how, and enabled me to do it. I identified myself completely with him. Indeed, I have been crucified with Christ. My ego is no longer central. It is no longer important that I appear righteous before you or have your good opinion, and I am no longer driven to impress God. Christ lives in me. The life you see me living is not "mine," but it is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I am not going to go back on that."

Think carefully on these words before we're too hard on Paul. "My ego is no longer central. It is no longer important that I have your good opinion. I'm not even driven to impress God, any longer." God's freely given gift of grace means Paul doesn't have to earn it, it's already given.

Both of these guys look at the same life of faith through different filters, like looking at the same accident from two different corners and seeing completely different things. Paul's confrontation to Peter is his confrontation to the church. I think all too often, the church is like Peter. We tend to be experiential learners. We tend to go back to that which is familiar – like going back to fishing – believing it's where we are safe. In its deepest fear, the church always seems to want to return to the law, where the rules are simple and we just have to perpetuate the right things to please God because that's the way we've always done it. I find it interesting that the institutional church was first built upon Peter...the rock.

Paul's first career was spent stirring up people's fear so that they would not step out of the box. That box reminds us of who's in and who's out. Pray harder, keep the laws more faithfully, don't bend, and God will love you....maybe. In this argument, according to Paul's assessment, Peter is still living there. I would submit the church lives there too, especially when we're afraid.

Paul's point is that grace already takes care of our right relationship with God. We can not be influenced by fear, or what other people will think. That's ego. And from where I stand, the church has an ego. We think we know where Spirit is working and we have the corner on the market of love and justice, healing and grace. The church judges who is "in" or "out" on the degree to which we believe in God, the Trinity, the infallibility of the bible, the divinity of Christ, the power of the church and all those other systems of belief. We can no longer worry whether we have someone's good opinion. We can no longer be afraid for our future. That's an arrogant assumption of entitlement. What right does the church have to live if it is not serving the world? That's ego. Going forward, our ego can no longer be central.

Paul tells the Galatians that he kept the rules and it got him nowhere. I think Paul is telling us the same thing. We don't have a right to exist simply because we always have. The life the world sees us living can no longer be ours; it must be the life of Christ living within us.

I quote Henri Nouwen in the words of meditation in the bulletin this morning. You may have noticed I've been doing that these last couple of weeks. Nouwen is saying the very same thing. "Becoming the beloved means letting the truth of our belovedness become enfleshed in everything we think, say and do." If we acknowledge ourselves to be the beloved, if we assert that this is true then our lives must be lived becoming the beloved. As I understand Paul, grace means that we are already the beloved even as we are becoming the beloved. And as we learned last week, there is no other gospel. Amen.