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Philippians 3:17-4:1

## “Healed from the Sin of Religion”

When I got home the other day I noticed something new hanging on the fridge. Like a lot of families we have our collage of current activities right there in full display. This was a construction paper shield with a pledge written by my oldest son, Ian...something he had done at school. It said, "I, Ian Moore, pledge to make a difference in this world by other people treating persons the way they want to be treated and to honor and respect people." Now that kind of thing makes a dad proud...until he reads a bit more closely. Now it could just be the syntax of a 2nd grader, but he clearly says that he will make the world a better place by having "other people" do stuff. Now, to be honest, I think that's a pretty common moral directive, but it sounds so transparent when you actually say it out loud.

I don't mean to pick on my kids from the pulpit, though it is my obligation as a father and preacher. So sorry, my sons, you were just born into this. You could have been born into much worse arrangements, I promise you. Still, reading this school project made me appreciate a couple of things. One, that my son is actually listening and two, that he is trying hard to imitate at least what I say.

See I have kind of hammered home the golden rule. My own father did this for me growing up; though by the time I got to my teenage years the "golden rule" sometimes switched from "do unto others..." to "he who has the gold makes the rules". But I guess that I inherited this moral directive and I am now trying to get my sons to imitate my own flawed and somewhat partial obedience to it.

This is what happens with children. They imitate the actions of the adults around them. As parents you learn this all too well and you find out what integrity you

have on given issues pretty quickly. There is a story about Gandhi meeting with a woman and her small child. The woman brings her son to Gandhi because he eats too much candy and she has tried everything. She asks Gandhi to tell him to stop because the boy looks up to him and will do it if he asks him to stop. Gandhi quickly tells her to bring the boy back in 3 weeks. Puzzled by this, she complies and waits for three weeks. When she brings him back, Gandhi looks at the boy and says, "Stop eating sweets, they are not good for you." The woman looks incredulous and says, "Why couldn't you have just said that three weeks ago instead of making me wait?" "Because", Gandhi replies, "three weeks ago *I* ate sweets."

What Gandhi teaches us in this story is that what we do matters more than what we say. I would add that who we are and how we act is more important than what we profess or claim. It could be argued that Paul had this same thing in mind. In many of his letters to the various *ekklesia*, or house churches, he talks about this need for transformation. Paul wants the new Jesus movement to know that "the Way" is more than a set of beliefs or what usually passed for religion at the time - a general understanding about who you were praying to. He wants them to know that the life "in Christ" is a life of engagement, relationship and the experience of God as a living force. He wants them to know that they can't just talk...they have to do. And if they're having trouble doing this - if they are child-like in their spiritual development - they can imitate others who are more mature. In most of his letters, Paul is really having a discussion about the nature of a spiritual life. We just get glimpses of this discussion - and only one side of it - in his letters to the various churches, the church at Phillipi being no exception.

This letter is Paul's happiest. In Romans, Paul is at his oratorical best; in the letters to the Corinthians he is admonishing, even angry. In Galatians he is borderline furious. All of these are aspects of why we cannot make theology out of Paul. If you were to take the last 5 years of Robin's sermons, sift through them and gather up various one-liners, salient points and theological comments you would still not arrive at a set theology, and certainly nothing remotely like a theological system. That's actually good. Because what we are doing up here every Sunday is not trying to spell out a religious doctrinal system. We are trying to lead and participate in a community that grows and changes and develops as we

encounter and experience God in our midst. We are trying the best we can to share those experiences of God with you...to inspire and challenge you...to convince you that the miraculous event of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus doesn't present us with doctrine; it presents us with the revelation that God cannot be contained or hoarded.

Paul had a hard setup. He was struggling to shepherd these Jesus followers to stand against traditional ways of religion, standard practices of authority and power and the flow of customary commerce and organization. He appeals to them throughout this letter to recognize that being "In Christ" means that your whole life changes and you live into that change in part by not responding in the same way to tradition or the "old ways" in the same old manner. He was doing nothing less than asking them to die to one life and be reborn into another - a new world, a new way of living, a new lord of their lives. That's quite a task because people like the idea of change, but not really change itself.

In a recent interview I read Sara Miles, the Director of Ministry at St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco, said this: "...people want to change and people don't want to change. People profoundly want to be made new, and people profoundly want to be clothed in Christ, to be born again. And they profoundly want to cling to everything old - about the world, and about themselves. The thing is, that church, as it's setup, is not usually a way to change; it's a way to cling to the way things are."

I believe that Paul found this out. As he was growing a spiritual movement, he encountered this kind of resistance, which was perhaps even more problematic than the resistance from the Temple or from Rome. He did not live to see his spiritual movement become even more beholden to this atrophy...to become even more solidified in doctrine and to engage itself even more deeply in the sin of religion.

Religion becomes sinful when it breaks from relationship and becomes codified or controlled by doctrine or creed. Take ritual for instance. As soon as we move from the ritual of communion being about something - like community or taking on the nourishment of Christ - then we reduce it to just a shallow, hollow set of movements that supposedly sets us right with God...as if God were an object

which could be manipulated by our actions. Once we step outside of the challenge to engage with other children of God and are able to "other-ize" them by marginalizing them we are engaging in sin...the thing that breaks relationship. Religion is often used to contain or entrap people more than it used to free people.

Paul tells the Philippians to break this cycle, a very natural one for us as human beings, by imitating him. Does this mean that Paul is so spotless and removed from the very thing we all struggle with that we can just do what he does? Well, In Greek, this word means something more like "fellow imitator" or a "follower together with". So what Paul is telling people is to follow with him - to be a fellow practitioner. Paul is just using the same method Gandhi will later - he is only willing to call people to what he is doing himself. Otherwise it's like bringing Mark McGwire in to speak to your baseball team about steroid use or Tiger Woods to...well, never mind.

So in Paul's way of thinking we follow a line of imitators of Christ. We can follow a path demonstrated to us -sometimes well, sometimes poorly - out of our tradition. We can also read the stories we have in scripture and see a Jesus who operates outside the barriers of religion. He participates in religion, but he is not limited by it. This is the Jesus who both heals and is healed. I think of the many stories of people Jesus heals, but also of the story of the woman at the well who challenges Jesus' established beliefs and ends up changing his mind. Our model is a person who changes his religion to fit his experiences.

See, here's the thing about religion. We create it. God did not create Christianity or Buddhism or Islam or any other religion. We human beings do that. Initially we do that as a way to access God, but it often becomes a way to contain or limit God. And of all people we in this Christian tradition should understand that God will not be contained. The story of Jesus is a story of God breaking through all of our ideas about how God works and what God does, and this can't be just a self-serving narrative. If God can shatter all of the preconceived traditions about the messiah, if God can show up where we least expect, if God can conquer pride, fear and even death, then why can't God shatter our own traditionalism and certainty - even still?

The great church historian and Yale scholar Jaroslav Pelikan once said, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."

Christianity today has largely been formed around and clings to traditionalism, worshipping texts or creeds instead of a God who is still speaking. This is, in part, what I think that Paul is talking about. He tells the Philippians that there are "so many people of whom I have warned you." And here I like Eugene's Peterson's paraphrase: "There are many out there taking other paths, choosing other goals, and trying to get you to go along with them. I've warned you of them many times; sadly, I'm having to do it again. All they want is easy street. They hate Christ's Cross. But easy street is a dead-end street. Those who live there make their bellies their gods; belches are their praise; all they can think of is their appetites."

They hate Christ's cross. Now we're not sure who Paul is speaking about here in an historical sense. Some think that Paul is talking about the religious legalistic folks who see God only in the dedication to the law - contained in the dietary restrictions. There are others who see this in a much more modern sense - people consumed by appetite...driven only by what they can get for them with no sense of common good.

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As I thought about who Paul was speaking to, I ran across this poem by the great Sufi poet Hafiz:

The small man  
Builds cages for everyone  
He  
Knows.  
While the sage,  
Who has to duck his head  
When the moon is low,  
Keeps dropping keys all night long

For the  
Beautiful  
Rowdy  
Prisoners.

Whatever label we might attach to them, I think that talking about people who won't engage in the suffering that comes with being feeling, loving people in relationship. They want something easier. They want the Gospel to be something easier...something that can be controlled or contained. Religion that encloses and contains us is in some ways easier. It keeps us from confronting the things that scare or challenge us. The danger with religion is that we can too easily think that we know the answer at stop engaging with God trying to speak to us still.

But let's be fair...that engagement is hard work. It is the narrative of the cross. You will be betrayed. You will be wounded. You will hurt and have your expectations shattered. To be followers of the way means that we live for something else. Our vision is larger than just our own singular lives. I don't wish anyone to suffer needlessly, or to suffer for suffering's sake. I don't hear the call for self-abuse or denial of the needs and wants of our bodies here...but I do hear this. We are in this world but ultimately not of it. We are undergoing transformation. This is not a doctrinal claim on us - it is a living claim. Only in the *living* of the Gospel - the *living* of the good news of liberation to all people can we be transformed.

Religion is not in and of itself bad. But it is like money -somewhat neutral, but it can sure turn on you quickly if you're not paying attention. A religious framework and practice gives us a way to keep paying attention. Instead of making the religious structure the point - something that we call idolatry - we can continue to find ways to focus our ever-wandering and fickle attention on God. Instead of the solidified and airtight argument we often make of religion, we can make our spiritual lives, our "story" if you will, more fluid and malleable. Instead of throwing out tradition because of traditionalism, we can find ways to relate to our tradition which are more useful and helpful, but no less honest. Instead of thinking of Christianity as a club we join, think of it as a body to which we belong. Again Sara Miles says in this interview, "Christianity puts you together

with all humanity. It's not about your choice. It's about "this person is a part of the body too," and I can't actually understand myself without understanding my relationship to you...it's a religion of relationship. And you don't get to pick what the edges of that are...the temptation is always to make it into a neat narrative, instead of to actually pay attention and say: where are the ragged edges in this story? Instead, make it a parable, not a fable."

Parables are about the unfolding of truth, not the arrival of truth. This is why the Golden Rule that Ian tried so hard to emulate in his pledge comes to us at the heart of all the religions of the world. It is a parabolic rule. There is no absolute way to treat someone else the way that you want to be treated. It is a rule of relationship. It still is the best elixir for a world which sometimes seems to be spiraling out of control.

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. We don't need many more tools, much further example, any additional imitation to heal ourselves from the sin of religion...we just need step outside of the cages we find ourselves in...even here in the progressive, liberal church where we don't have any "dogma", right? Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. It sounds so simple yet people are thrown into prison and rejected and even killed for such stuff. Still, despite the suffering that comes with embracing this kind of simple, radical and revolutionary imitation, if we were to participate in God's way like this we might be surprised at the joy it brings, the peace we feel and the transformation we see all around us. We might be surprised...

So...Good ship Mayflower... if we wonder why we do something and the answer is "it's just the way we've always done it", then we might need to listen a little more closely...so, in the time to come, be open to change, embrace the newness that God places before us... and...steady as she goes.

**AMEN**