

Sermons at Central Park United Methodist Church  
The Rev. Mary A. Kelly  
8 March 2020; based on Romans 4:1-4, 13-7 and John 3:1-17

The Apostle Paul lived during troubled, anxious times.

We who are content to worship freely as we are, without fear of reprisal or recrimination, must remember that Paul was converted to the Faith by the crucified and risen Christ in dramatic fashion on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3), and called by God (Acts 9:15) to bring together a disparate, diverse group of people to be the new community we now call “*Church*.” Paul’s task was a monumental one, and had it not been by God’s desire and design it most certainly would have failed. Imagine the cultural barriers- indeed laws- that kept Jews and gentiles apart. On either side, “the other” was branded as unclean, *less than*, foreign, dirty, shameful and scorned.

They ate different foods and worshiped in different ways, yet in Jesus Christ they were mysteriously united as one body. Still, controversies arose that threatened their peaceful coexistence; chief among these concerned the Jewish practice of male circumcision. In those days, Jews were circumcised and gentiles were not; hence the question arose: was the ritual of circumcision a requirement for those who sought to follow Jesus? In other words, were the first Believers called to adhere to specific Jewish law, or was God doing a new thing among the peoples? Paul was a devout Jew, yet by the power of the Holy Spirit he was led to a novel and different understanding, that it was *faith*, and not the law, that *justified* Believers before God. “*For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith.*” (Romans 4:13) Paul argued that Abraham was led by God through faith *prior* to Abraham’s circumcision; therefore his

faith preceded the action and the circumcision merely served as a sign of that conviction.

Abraham's faith preceded his own circumcision; therefore gentiles and others who were not circumcised also had access to righteousness. Abraham is our shared ancestor, not by flesh, but by the Spirit.

Our God insists on continually reconciling us to one another, even as our propensity for sin seeks to drive us apart. "*Blessed are the peacemakers,*" Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount, "*for they will be called children of God.*" (Matthew 5:9) For Jesus, these attempts at reconciling us one to another- and ultimately to God- looked like meeting with and talking to anyone who sought out his counsel. Nicodemus, we read in John's Gospel, was one such seeker, coming to Jesus by night, presumably so as not to be seen by his fellow Pharisees (John 3:2). Nicodemus seems genuine in his desire to know Jesus, but also genuinely confused by the answers Jesus provides. Bound by constraints of the flesh, Nicodemus wants easy-to-understand solutions while Jesus, the Son of God made flesh, speaks in spiritual ways of the divine activities of God. "*What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'*" (John 3:6-7) To be born from above is to surrender to the great mystery that is faith; to shed our hubris and relinquish our false sense of control; to cast aside human doubt and fear; to exchange *all of it* for the belief that God sent His Son into the world so that you and I might be saved.

Regardless of our sinful nature, Christ draws us together in faith, and covers all our sin with His grace. This is God's doing, and not our own; "*For God so loved the world that*

*He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3:16-17)*

If we have faith so as to believe where we have not yet seen (Hebrews 11:1), and that faith has led us to confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead, and therefore we will be saved (Romans 10:9); how is it that we can continue to live at war with one another, even our sisters and brothers in Christ? Like Paul, we live during troubled, anxious times; called forth by God to be the universal community of faith we call “*Church*.” Yet we quarrel and fight. Some of us are estranged from family members; some from neighbors, and others from friends. We are quick to condemn as “other” those who eat different foods and worship in different ways, branding them as unclean, *less than*, foreign, dirty, shameful and scorned.

Yet we lay claim to discipleship, and proclaim Christ’s Gospel of love: a love that must be lived out according to our faith. “*I give you a new commandment*,” Jesus said to His disciples, “*that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*” (John 13:34-35)

Jesus is the Good News of this and every age! Though we have anxiety, and stress, and strife, we are bathed in the grace of a God who so loved the world that He gave us His Son. (John 3:16) This same God calls us to be reconciled to one another, knowing that the Body of Christ is clothed with power from on high (Luke 24:49). We,

dear friends, are God's children. We have access to the power of the Holy Spirit, and we must embody God's love- not just for some- but for all the world.

Have faith.

Believe.

And our Triune God will lead us forth to glory.