

The 3rd Sunday after Pentecost/Proper 5. June 5, 2016 St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland
1 Kings 17:17-24, Galatians 1:11-24 Luke 7:11-17 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

As some of you no doubt know, if you use "Twitter" – the messaging app – you're limited to 140 characters – meaning that if the average length of a word is about 5 characters (apparently that's my average word length!!) then you're limited to 23 words!

Picture St. Paul pacing about, dictating his letters – that's how he did it, by dictation – he didn't actually write his own letters, he had a scribe. How many words do you think there are in the letter to the Galatians? 3098, or 135 separate Twitter messages.

Or just take today's reading – there are 270 words - that would be 12 Twitter messages.

Paul would be lost today, wouldn't he?!!

And so are most of us! Who uses Twitter here?

How about email? That's a little easier! But even with email there's a limit. Few people ever scroll down, so if you don't get your message "above the fold" (to use old-fashioned newspaper language!) then you can forget it!

Today's world challenges us to communicate concisely, briefly, in just a few words, because contemporary attention spans are equally brief. We have to condense the message down to its core, to say in just a few words what preachers say in many. What, then is the core of Paul's message in today's passage? Can I do it in "Tweet" length?" Well, surely it's this:

"Through divine grace, God called me to proclaim the Good News of Jesus, the Anointed One. That same God calls you, too." 23 words.

That's who Paul is, and that's what he believes he has to do: proclaim the Good News of Jesus.

For us, today's reading is even more remarkable, because what we see is Paul's spiritual autobiography. It says that "Apostle" isn't a job he applied for, since it was to represent – champion – a faith he wanted to eradicate. Nor, while he was going about his day-to-day job of persecuting Christians, was he looking to make a substantial change in his life's direction.

Nevertheless, "God's grace called me to proclaim transformation" – which is an even more pithy and redacted version of my Tweet – is shorthand for Paul's spiritual autobiography. Paul – a man who went from persecutor to preacher – Paul, whose transformation gives evidence of the hand of God at work in his life.

Now in some circumstances, Paul's proclamation could be nothing more than self-promotion – but not here. Here, Paul tells the Galatians his own faith story to remind them of their own experience of "the one who called you in the grace of Christ" (Galatians 1:6; cf. 5:7, 5:13).

Central to Paul's vision of transformation through God's grace is his understanding of what's required to be a follower of Jesus - and you could sum that up in even fewer words: "Jesus is

Lord.” The most radical, anti-Roman, seditious, of statements. Jesus is Lord. God is at the center of everything.

Galatians as a letter is really quite blunt. Paul’s not a happy camper because he has heard that the Galatians have been listening to another group of Jesus followers, who are telling them that they’re not fully members of the family of God unless they adhere to the same practices that were central to mainstream Judaism, in this case, circumcision.

And not just listening, apparently, but starting to adopt those practices. From Paul’s perspective, this is nothing short of turning away from the freedom of the gospel that he preached to them previously, a gospel where “the only thing that counts is faith working through love.” (Galatians 5:6b).

Why would they do that? Why would they listen to these others and turn away? Why would they surrender the freedom of the gospel? Paul’s answer was this: “.....so that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ” (Galatians 6:12).

The freedom of God’s grace is likely to be costly because it demands a responsibility toward others.

Most of Paul’s letter to the Galatians is about this freedom, and over the coming weeks we’ll hear more about it. The thing I wondered about today is this: why did Paul share his story? I think it’s because he was trying to encourage the Galatians to examine their own experiences for the transformative signs of God’s call.

So he tells his own story, one that’s dramatic, powerful, almost sensational: a persecutor of the early Church, willing to see people die if they were unwilling to fit within his small religious box; a narrow-minded religious zealot obsessed with the letter of the Law but quite uninterested with its spirit. A person who, perhaps above any other, would have been feared, even hated, in the early Christian community.

And then, while he was going about his murderous business, he has a vision, he encounters the one who he persecutes, and it changes him from a hater into a lover, from an excluder to an includer, from a wielder of anger to a celebrator of joy.

Paul was the most influential Christ-follower who never laid eyes on the earthly Jesus. He tells his story in part, I believe, for exactly that reason, echoing the words of Jesus in John’s gospel, “Blessed are those who have not seen, yet come to believe.” “This is my story,” he says, “what’s yours?”

What’s yours? We all have stories about how we came to faith. Occasionally they’re like Paul’s, but I have to say that his story is dramatically unusual! Some of us can point to that moment of transformation (often we call it “conversion”) but most of us – and I include myself – recognize that transformation, those moments, only in retrospect.

How did God call you? Where were, where are the moments of transformation? When did your life change direction?

For Paul, God's call was for him to share the good news. So that's what he did. In the end, it's that same call Paul wants us to see, which is why he not only asked the Galatians but also asks us: how is God be calling you for the purpose of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ?