

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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May these words of my mouth and this meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our Comfort and our Conviction. Amen.

- It took me 19 years of growing up within the church before learning how important context is when reading and studying the bible.
 - I was in my sophomore year of college, and had signed up to take my second required religion course.
 - It was a bit of a bait and switch on the professor's part because all students were required to take a 100 level and 200 level Religion course
 - But when students showed up for this particular 200 level course, they were told: "yes this is a religion course where we will study the gospel of Mark. But it is also a theater course where we will act out scenes from the gospel, and your final assignment is a performance of Mark that you will write, direct, and perform."
 - Though it was daunting at first, the class was invaluable in how it taught us the importance of placing these ancient stories in the context of human lives and bodies.
 - Stories such as Jesus refusing to heal the Syrophenician woman's daughter have an entirely different impact when the words are taken off the 2 dimensional page, and are spoken and acted aloud.
 - It was the hardest class I ever took in my life, but also the most important
 - Because it grounded me in the understanding that, more than anything, these ancient texts are stories of people encountering

one another and encountering God, the same way our lives today are stories of similar encounters.

- However the class wasn't impactful just because of the acting
 - It also served as a history class
 - When we were not acting we were studying the historical, social, and political contexts the scriptures were told and written in
 - In fact it was in this class that I learned most of Paul's letters from the New Testament are actually older than the written manuscripts of the gospels
 - The Gospels still existed, but as an oral spoken tradition.
 - And it completely shifted the entire class's understanding of what scripture meant to the original audience, and what it means to us today.
- So, as an example of how important these contexts are, let's examine today's reading from Galatians at surface level. Which, admittedly sounds pretty nice:
 - We are to bear one another's burdens
 - You reap whatever you sow
 - So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time if we do not give up
 - And, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all
- Like I said, Paul's language of encouragement is nice
 - And, if the bible was written in a bubble, a vacuum completely free of anything else going on in the world, this letter to Galatia could still make a nice, comfy cozy sermon.
 - It's always nice to hear words of encouragement about lifting each other up and working for good
- And yet, examining the context of when and where and to whom it was written expands the meaning

- So, the context of Galatia:
 - This letter was written to a community of early Jesus Movement followers that Paul had started, specifically teaching them that faith alone in Jesus makes them justified before God, and it is this faith that brings forth a new life in the believers and a new creation by extension of their actions
 - This letter was also written after other preachers had come to the community and tried to convince them that Paul was wrong.
 - That the believers needed to be circumcised according to the old law to be justified in God's eyes
 - Thus, Paul is reasserting what he had originally taught to this community and reminding them what really matters
 - It's not about whether or not they have "done the right thing." But about whether or not they are living faithfully.
 - Are they bearing each others burdens, are they doing right wherever and whenever possible?
 - Another key factor in the context of Paul's audience is the very real threat of Christian persecution
 - Paul was originally a persecutor of Christians, by his own admission he tried to stamp out the entire movement of Jesus followers prior to his conversion and life as an apostle
 - And in historical accounts, there's no shortage of martyrs in the early church, put to death for their beliefs
 - In the words of early church father Tertullian
 - They think the Christians the cause of every public disaster, of every affliction with which the people are visited. If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile does not send its waters up over the fields, if the heavens give no rain, if there is an earthquake, if there is famine or pestilence, straightway the cry is, 'Away with the Christians to the lions!'

- In this context, I cannot help but be amazed by Paul's conviction in his words to the church in Galatia
 - To tell people "whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all" in the midst of active persecution of the community, is an act of faith bar none
- To bear one another's burdens in the midst of tumultuous times when your way of life puts you at odds with society is no small feat.
- In a similar way, hearing Jesus' words in Luke's gospel carry a greater weight when examined in their original context
 - Today we might be tempted to hear basic instructions for how to go out into the land and spread the message of Jesus
 - But in reality, it was far more dangerous, dangerous to the point of getting Jesus killed
 - Spreading this message was not a guaranteed safe lifestyle. Jesus' message of radical love threatened the power of empire, and when power is threatened it often lashes out to quell the threat
 - And yet, the people went out, in the face of opposition,
 - In the face of an empire that was actively working towards the goal of putting Jesus to death.
- Perhaps by this point you can see the connecting thread here. Because we encounter these stories within our own particular context as well.
 - And, this past week, really this past month or so, has not been a particularly easy one. It seems every time I switch on the news there is yet another tragedy, continued inaction from our elected leaders, and the action that does come down from government is more interested in removing rights than ensuring equity.
 - Maybe it's a self-fulfilling millennial prophecy but I am feeling the weight of it all
 - And I often spiral into a line of wondering "what's the point?"

- Why should I even try, when it seems like any efforts at doing good are met by multiple instances of evil winning regardless?
 - Last week I preached on how USA Christianity has an obsession with the acquisition and retention of power
 - And in the light of that, it seems logical to ask “why even try when everything is so seemingly futile”
- Which is why I turn to the context that our scriptures were composed in.
 - Our ancestors in the faith were no stranger to hardships and opposition
 - In fact, they likely felt even more certain than I do that the cards were stacked against them
 - And, I find an odd sort of comfort within this reality
 - We have within our spiritual DNA the ability to follow the call to love even when it may seem futile, even when the powerful empire lashes out to quell the movement.
 - Because, at the end of the day, the goal is not a world dominated or controlled by Christian ideology
 - But a new creation, transformed and continually made new according to God’s vision for us all,
 - Where all have enough. Where the vulnerable are protected. Where share with one another in all good things and bear on another’s burdens to ease the pain.
- May this knowledge be comfort for us all, and conviction to move us forward in the times to come. And, may a new creation continue to spring painfully forth. Amen.