Book 12

Sunday July 3, 1983

"CHANGE, FREEDOM AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH"
Galatians 5:1, 13-18
Luke 9:51-62

The people in the congregation of the church in Galatia, had a problem. They had difficulty in accepting the fact that God is loving and forgiving. They kept wanting to hold onto the image of an angry, demanding, vengeful God, One who must constanstly be appeased; a God more interested in whether or not people followed the rules of religion.

To make matters worse, there were a number of individuals in the congregation who were persuading the people that faith was not enough to enter God's kingdom. In addition to accepting Jesus Christ as the Savior, they were insisting that one also had to become a part of the Jewish religion and observe all the ritual laws and customs of that tradition.

These same individuals tried to convince the people that the Apostle Paul had preached to them a false gospel.

There was also another group in that congregation which attacked Paul from the opposite side. Influenced by the pagan notion that religion transcends ethics and is separable from morality, they wanted to abandon the Old Testament completely.

Paul was caught in the middle. People on one side of the conflict were watching to be sure that everyone followed all the rules, and people on the other side were wanting to cut Christianity completely free from its Jewish heritage. The debate was so sharp that Paul had to warn his readers against biting and devouring one another.

Since Paul could not be present in person in Galatia to try to clear up the situation, he wrote a letter to that congregation. We read a part of that letter this morning in our scripture reading. It's a revolutionary document.

In it, Paul develops the concept of the unity of all people under God and he sees the church as the instrument for promoting and living out this truth. The greatest obstacle to equality in Christ is the deadly trait of people always wanting to put others down, or enslave others in their system, and the tendency to be exclusive.

This sin is all the more dangerous because it usually cloaks itself in the garment of sincere, conscientious loyalty to outgrown religious ideas and customs. For example, the Jews were brought up to believe that eating with Gentiles was a flagrant violation of God's revealed will which would bring down God's terrible wrath. Thus they had a religious foundation for segregation and exclusivity.

Throughout human history, we have tried to find religious justification for our deepest prejudices and our violent actions. We've said, "God doesn't want blacks and whites to live together." "God doesn't want blacks and whites to go to school together." In the time of slavery, we said, "God meant for some people to be inferior to others, and be their slaves." Today those who are opposed to equality for women say: "God has so made us that women are to be obedient to men."

Paul reminded the Galatians and us, "For as many of you as were baptized in Christ, have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." A revolutionary idea! (Galatians 3:27-28)

But we have not changed very much. Today there are Christian churches which will not allow other Christians to participate with them in Holy Communion. There are churches that have so many rules and regulations that one begins to feel that the grace of God has been forgotten and that one can only be accepted by God by following all the proper religious rules and traditions. The image one gets of God is that of a rule-maker and nothing more.

In this church we perform many marriage ceremonies and at least half of these are for individuals who are not members of this congregation. We always ask such couples why they have come to us to be married and a large majority of them tell us that it's because other churches and often the churches of which they are members, refuse to do the ceremony or make it so difficult for them and are so judgmental that they seek to be married elsewhere.

Many of these individuals have been married before, and have gone through the agony of divorce. They are sorry about their marriage failure and want to start fresh and

are looking for a church which will be loving, forgiving and accepting, rather than for a church which simply quotes rules and regulations.

What is it do you suppose that always tempts us to want to fall back on rules and in effect give up our freedom? Or to put it another way, what is it that makes us afraid of looking at new ideas and questioning our old assumptions? Why is it so difficult for us to believe that under God we are all created equal and that we are brothers and sisters in one human race?

1. One reason might be that we like to take the easy way out. If one can quote a rule or regulation instead of having to think through a decision, it's easier. There's a certain security in having all questions answered even before they are asked.

And we so quickly give up for freedom to those who claim to have all the right answers. It's no wonder that throughout history, tryant after tyrant has been able to control so many people. Freedom can be a burden for some because it requires responsibility and decision.

There is a locked up potential in all of us that frequently remains locked up tight, because we are willing to sell our freedom as persons for the security of the system. We're always tempted to give our soul over for safekeeping, to exchange our freedom for the security that might come from an infallible book, an infallible church, an infallible tradition, an infallible husband or wife, an infallible set of principles.

2. A second reason we are afraid of freedom is that it always implies change, and we are often afraid of change. We forget that the Bible is a book which tells the story of change after change, and how to meet a changing world.

The story of the Bible begins in a garden, but very soon the occupants must move out into a strange and forbidding world, into a new way of life. One cartoonist shows Adam and Eve leaving the Garden of Eden with Adam saying to his wife, "My dear, let's face it, we live in a time of transition."

The Bible continues to be filled with stories about one change after another as people live out their freedom.

And in the final pages of the Bible there is a kind of cosmic change and transition, as we read: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more. . . . and he who sat upon the throne said, 'Behold, I make all things new."

In the Old Testament, Abraham leaves his home to go to a new land that God shows him and is told by God,"You must not return to the old and familar, but press on."

Moses calls forth the Israelites from Egypt, and rebukes them when they yearn to return to Egypt and slavery of the past. Later Jeremiah watches his people overrun by the enemy and carried off into a Babylonian captivity, but tells them: "You will be in Babylon for a long time. Don't look back! Make the most of where you are! Learn to live in this strange new place.

Almost everywhere the Biblical message is the same; you must let go of the past, or you will never find the future. You mast not be a prisoner to some old world, lest you never find the new world. You must get beyond nostalgia or die.

Remember the Biblical story of Abraham's nephew, Lot, and the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. God turned Lot's face toward the future, away from those places fit only for destruction and said, "Go into the future. Do not look back! But Lot's wife couldn't resist looking back, perhaps from nostalgia, or because she was afraid to go to a new place, but when she did, she became a pillar of salt.

We are to remember the past and learn from it; but we are not to be afraid of the future and of freedom and the change which freedom implies.

In our Gospel lesson for today, we hear JESUS say, "No one who puts his or her hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God."

Our Christian faith emphasizes that we are to remember the past, but not live in it. We are not to be afraid of freedom and of the change that goes with it. There's nothing wrong with a rearview mirror, if we remember what it's for.

Yet there is in all of that contradiction which makes us wnat to old onto that which represents the past or the status quo.

Perhaps no one so dramatically introduced us the idea of change as did Charles Darwin. He found evidence everywhere that the life force--deep within every living thing--is always moving toward change. Without it there is death. And yet this intellectual and scientific giant was a mild-mannered victorian, who in his own private life detested change and complained constantly of it.

His wife, indeed, told her friend that he was a constant complainer. On one occasion, when he had to put up with a banquet, given in a way to which he was not accustomed, everything seemed to go wrong; dry speeches, flat champagne, poor service, cold food. At the end of the evening, the sponsor of the affair came to apologize to Mrs. Darwin and she said abruptly, "Don't!" "Charles had a wonderful time. He was able to find fault with everything--and nothing makes him happier than that."

How many of us, resistant to change, are made happy, or at least think we are happy when we can find fault with the young people of today, with the schools, the government, the media, and all the strange new values. We are very much like Darwin, a man who taught us so forcefully about the necessity, indeed the inevitability of change, and who himself tried hard to resist change. We forget that God is often working in and through the changes that take place in this world.

Look at the history of our own country. Those who wrote the Declaration of Independence said that we human beings have the right and the duty to bring about change, particularly when any form of government becomes destructive of the basic rights of its citizens. They wrote: "It is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it and to institute new government, laying its foundation on cuch principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness."

The history of our country is the history of change and the freedom that goes with change. We hve not been static since the revolution of 1776, and thank God for that.

Following the war of independence we had to face the decision as to whether we were going to be a loosely organized confederation of individual states or a nation made up of states. Out of this came our present constitution and it has been amended many times.

A little later there was the abolitionist movement, the movement to free the slaves and this was followed by the civila war and then the trauma and trial of reconstruction. Following that came the movement for women suffrage and after that the labor revolution. During the great depression there was the Veteran's rebellion and during the 1950's and the 60's the civil rights revolution. Today the movement continues as does the movement for equal rights for women. And these will not die, but will go on to continue to change our world.

The point is that because God has given us freedom, change is built into our lives and into the world. And it is the message of the Christian faith that God is often working through the changes that come about.

Surely, no individual in the long reach of human history has ever ushered in such a movement of change and freedom as did Jesus of Nazareth. It came more slowly that some of our modern forms, but it came with a lasting power and presence which the human family cannot escape, and the change which he inaugurated will not be stopped--the change which Paul wrote to the Galatians about--the fact that we are one human family, and that we can no longer live by being concerned only about our tribal or national well-being, or be pre-occupied with a tiny piece of real estate, or wrapped up in our private affairs and petty daydreams saturated with silly religious rules and regulations.

For a hundred, thousand million years, God has been moving us toward the day when we must learn to live together as one family, over all the face of the earth, or perish together. Everything connects us in these days--our means of transport, communications, economics, the very nature of war; and it reminds us, your world is too small unless it embraces the whole planet.

So as we prepare to celebrate once again the birth of our nation, we can look back at our country's history and instead of blind resisting change of any kind, and wanting to stay where we are, or wanting to live in the past, we

can instead take a very positive attitude toward change and the freedom it represents. It's part of our Christian faith and it is God at work. Amen.