

On any given Sunday in an Episcopal Church near you, the congregation is likely to hear the preacher talk about the gospel lesson appointed for the day. There is a chance the preacher will switch things up and talk about the lesson assigned from the Old Testament. And there is a small chance that the New Testament epistle will be the focus for the sermon. That said, I'm going against the odds and will preach on the epistle from Galatians.

Nearly all the epistles or letters were written before the gospel texts were written. Almost all these letters were written by Paul including today's letter to the Galatians. In most cases, Paul is writing follow up letters to churches he previously planted, and they mainly address circumstances and controversies faced by the church at the time.

For example, Paul writes to the church in Corinth because they need a refresher course on what holy living looks like. He writes to the church in Philippi to thank them for funding his missionary journey and to offer encouragement in the face of persecution. In his letter to the Romans, he addresses Christian unity in a cosmopolitan setting.

In his letter to the church in Galatia, which was his first epistle, Paul addresses the ongoing controversies between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. It is critical to note that Paul is not writing to Jewish Christians. Rather, he is writing to Gentile Christians. Therefore, we shouldn't use the letter to rebuke Jewish Christians which some have done.

If anything, Paul rebukes himself in the letter to the Galatians. In particular, he talks about how he misused religion to persecute Christians. Paul's misguided zeal for religion ultimately leads him to hate. Reminds me of the saying, if your religion causes you to hate, you need to rethink your religion. As it relates to Paul, I'm not suggesting that Judaism causes him to hate.

Rather, Paul twisted Jewish teachings in such a way as to justify his persecution of the early church. Subsequently, many Christians have twisted Paul's letters to justify their hatred and persecution of the Jewish people. Additionally, Christians have used the Bible for two millennia to justify their hatred and persecution of other groups of people both sacred and secular.

Like any religious or moral text, we human beings are quite skillful at manipulating and weaponizing documents to support our own worldview in order to justify our actions. I believe the official word for this self-justification tactic is confirmation bias.

We do this with the Bible all the time both consciously and unconsciously. We go to the scriptures to confirm a pre-existing belief and conveniently ignore the texts that challenge our pre-existing beliefs. That said, the Bible should both comfort and challenge what you believe and how you act in the world.

Biblical scholar and writer, Eugene Peterson speaks of the dangers of religious texts saying, "When men and women get their hands on religion, one of the first things they often do is turn it into an instrument for controlling others." He goes on to say of Paul's conversion, "Through Jesus, Paul learned that God was not...to be used to make people behave in certain prescribed ways, but a Savior who set us free to live a free life. God did not coerce us from without, but set us free from within."

In extreme cases, religious leaders try to coerce from without by shaming or terrifying people into obedience. If we can make them feel bad enough for their sins and dangle hell over their heads, then surely, they'll follow the straight and narrow. Plenty have distorted the gospel of Jesus Christ in this way. Before you start thinking of the other

Christians who do this, take a hard look at your own faith tradition before judging the other. Even we inclusive and welcoming Episcopalians have a lot to repent for along these lines.

Shaming, intimidating, frightening people into submission doesn't free them from their sin. Rather, it only serves to make the sinner hide away in shame – closing them off to inner transformation. The gospel, however, is meant to free the sinner from shame so they may be open to the Spirit's transformative work and be changed from inside out.

This release from shame begins when we hear God in Christ say to us, "I have borne the shame of your sins on the cross and have been raised to life so you can be free to live again." In response we might ask, "why would you do that, God?" Because I want you to know my love for you will never change. There is nothing you can do to make me love you more. There is nothing you can do to make me love you less. I love you."

This release from shame and fear gives us the grace to bring our vulnerabilities and insecurities to the light without fear of rejection or abandonment. When we bring our weakness to the light, we open ourselves to the power of the Holy Spirit who means to lead us on a lifelong journey of inner transformation. Ultimately, this inner transformation sees us go from a self-centered life to a God-centered life, which is where true freedom is found.

As Paul says, this inner transformation from a self-centered life to a God-centered life frees us to love others as ourselves. It is kind of hard to love others when, when we, ourselves, don't even know we are loved. One of the biggest obstacles to the knowledge of our belovedness is the dark cloud of shame and fear.

When Paul talks about not falling back into the yoke of slavery, he is reminding the Galatians that Christ is not in the business of controlling them by shame and fear like some religious leaders. Rather, Christ desires to free them to live for others by transforming them from inside out with his grace and love.

The work of inner transformation is neither quick nor efficient. It takes time to bear the fruit of the Spirit. I learned a few weeks ago, for example, that it takes nearly two years for pineapples to grow to maturity. It can take up to 12 years for some fruit trees to go from seed to maturity. We can't rush the work of the Spirit. If we start to rush the Spirit, we are regressing to a self-centered instead of God-centered life.

The work of inner transformation is also a lifelong journey because when we stop tending to our soul, we are in danger of allowing weeds (aka self-centered desires) grow in our heart, which leads to those things that are antithetical to kingdom living – idolatry, jealousy, anger, envy, fornication, strife, and factions to name a few.

And like I said last week, there will always be weeds to tend to in the garden of our soul. But instead of seeing those weeds as something to be ashamed of or afraid of, the gospel invites us to see those weeds as an opportunity to return to the God who loves us without condition, as an opportunity to return to the God who desires to free us from shame and fear, as an opportunity to return to the God who desires to plant and grow the fruit of the Spirit within us.

Our will power can only keep the weeds at bay for so long, but God's grace and love have the power to choke them out for good with the fruits of the Spirit. Think of our will power as chopping off the top of the weed without dealing with the root and think of God's grace and love as pulling the weeds from the root. In medical terms, our will power usually deals with the symptom while God's grace and love deals with the underlying disease.

In the end, the gospel invites us to a life of repentance, a life of returning to the God who desires to transform us from the inside out by loving us without condition – not by shaming us into submission. Episcopal lay theologian and writer, Verna Dozier, reminds us of this truth writing, “Jesus preached repentance, the church settled for moralism.”

In other words, the church settled for behavior modification that often motivates people through shame and fear. On the flip side, the church sometimes motivates by the promise of reward. Either way, the church is communicating that God’s love is something to be earned, which leads to the belief that we have to work to be loved and accepted. In both cases, salvation becomes about us and only perpetuates a self-centered life.

When we return to God and ask for help, we are committing to a God-centered life – one where we are free to live for and love the other. And we can only really feel free to live for and love the other, when we are no longer worried about our own standing before God and others, when we know we are loved without condition.

As long as we try to justify ourselves by either comparing ourselves to others or by making excuses for our sins, we are focused on the self. However, when we trust that God’s love for us in Christ is what truly justifies us, we are led to a God-centered life.

And this God-centered life will grow in us a faith that has the power to release ourselves, our communities, and our world from the crippling forces of shame and fear and thereby freeing us to love our neighbor as ourselves. Amen.