

Emmaus Road Sermon
Anita Rediger
June 20, 2010

“Clothed in Christ”

Along with the marvelous speed of air travel come some undesirable challenges; weather delays, mechanical problems, lost luggage, the scrutiny of security and the dreaded words “flight cancelled.” Another reality of air travel is the need to navigate the world of “the airport!” Airports are combination train terminal, shopping mall and truck stop. They may not be our favorite places to pass the time, (or spend our money when stranded) but they certainly provide a wonderful venue to rub shoulders with the people of the world. It is delightful to suddenly be surrounded by persons of all colors, speaking a variety of languages and by their dress representing various religions. Who are all of these going? Who might they be talking to on their cell phones? Who will be waiting for them when they arrive home? There is definitely something thrilling about being part of this great “throng!”

This morning’s text comes from a letter addressed to a group of people called the “Galatians.” This differs from other letters written to communities in specific cities such as Ephesus or Thessalonica. Brigitte Kahl (*Galatians Reimagined*) writes that the “Galatians” were much more than a small community of people in the area we know as modern Turkey. “The Galatians” were kin to the Gaul’s of France, the Celts of the British Isles...all Gaelic peoples. This was a diverse group of people spread across Europe from East to West. They sound like quintessential gentiles to me! Yet, the burning question among them is whether or not folks must adhere to the Law of Moses. Strange...why would these folks put pressure on one another to become Jews? Until reading from Kahl’s research, I assumed that this was a group of Diaspora Jews that had become Christ followers. I had assumed that others from the surrounding area - persons who weren’t Jews- were being attracted to this life-giving community- hence the tension about who’s in and who’s not. But...if these Galatians weren’t Jews in the first place, why would they be concerned about becoming Jewish in order to be Jesus followers?

What else could be going on here?

I hadn’t considered the broader social context that the Galatian Christians found themselves in. As we read the Gospels, scholars are helping us to become more aware of the challenge that Jesus presented to the power of the Roman Empire. We’re coming to understand that the titles given to Jesus, “Son of God,” “Lord and Savior of the world,” were titles which had been exclusively reserved for Caesar! Instead of promoting allegiance to the way of Rome, Jesus came proclaiming a different kingdom, the kingdom of God! Truly, an upside-down kingdom!

In the social order, like most of the people Jesus encountered, the Galatians were a people on the outside. The Galatians knew what it meant to be vanquished by Rome! They were underdogs and Jesus’ liberating word was “Good News” for them. But following Jesus

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was risky business. In contrast, for the most part, Jews were often tolerated and granted exception to the demands of Rome...that is if they remained quiet enough and complicit enough! (Remember the complimentary relationship between the scribes and Pharisees and the powers of Rome! – and Jesus' challenge?)

Having a Jewish appearance might afford a bit of security to this budding fellowship. Perhaps, if this new church could fall under the old umbrella of *religio licita*, a recognized religion. (In the early Roman empire Judaism was a tolerated religion alongside of the Imperial cult of worship of Emperor. Christianity, on the other hand, was *religio illicita*, an illicit religion.) If the new Christians became Jews they would be safer- even if it meant hedging on their faith, even if it meant that some people just *wouldn't* be welcome...even if it meant that some *couldn't* belong...it would just be safer that way..."Disguising" themselves in the trappings as Jews would keep Empire "happy."

And it wasn't only the Galatians who struggled with wanting "approval." In Galatians 2, Paul chastises Peter for sending "mixed messages" to the gentile believers. Apparently, when he was with ordinary "Galatians," he had no problem eating at table and fellowshiping with them. However, when "certain people came from James (the Lord's brother! Jewish folks!) he drew back and avoided contact with his previous brethren....

Now, Paul poses a really challenging question, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (2:11-14) What a pointed question for Peter! What an important question for us! When we send these kinds of mixed messages, no wonder folks become cynical with the church. If I, a follower of Jesus, live like one who isn't, how can I place expectations of discipleship on others? How easy it is to "hide" when following Jesus becomes unpopular!

Next weekend, many of us will gather for Central District Conference Annual Meeting. In our identity documents as the Central District Conference we find these words of intention. *We seek to promote a Christ-like community of hospitality where all are welcome and where grace-filled relationships flourish, and patience and generosity are practiced.*

At Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship what does this mean? Are we "seeking to be a Christ-like community?" Can we affirm that we seek to be a place "of hospitality where all are welcome?" and "where grace-filled relationships flourish, and patience and generosity are practiced?" What do these words really mean?

What do these words mean, what actions of ours will follow, if the real life people coming to our door are: illegal immigrants? What would this mean if real life persons are of "uncertain" sexual orientation or perhaps openly gay or lesbian? For me personally, perhaps most problematic would be the challenge I would face if one of the persons who took part in this past

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week's firing squad in the Utah prison wanted to fellowship with us – as a Christian brother. Newsweek of June 21, 2010 – cover story entitled, “Saint Sarah.” (an article about Sarah Palin’s appeal to conservative Christian women.) It is very unsettling to me to read that conservative Christian women consider Sarah Palin the “model of the ideal Christian woman.” For me, this isn’t a question of politics. It is a challenge to the identity of “church.” To which kingdom is our allegiance if we exclude the alien, kill our enemies and ostracize those who don’t quite fit our expectations of ‘acceptable?’

Who are we really if as followers of Jesus we embrace as religious leaders those who “preach God, flag and family?” (Our dear sister, Maggie, serves much better for me as a “model” of Christian discipleship.)

Are we so very different from the early believers in Galatia? What prevents us from being/doing these things that the CDC document calls **us to?** ... promote a Christ-like community of hospitality where all are welcome and where grace-filled relationships flourish, and patience and generosity are practiced.

Could fear for our safety or at least our popularity have something to do with it? What persons are we willing to “sacrifice” in order to remain “acceptable” in the wider Christian culture, or to remain acceptable in our local community? What threats may come to us from “Empire” or “Christian-Empire” vantage points if we really practice these intentions? Who are we willing to “leave out” so that we can keep our little community as safe as possible from criticism and misunderstanding?

I certainly don’t blame the Galatians for trying to find a way to survive... yet I’m challenged by the response of the earliest Anabaptists to the threat of Empire’s demands for conformity. Instead of cleverly crafted compromise they were martyred for their faith. Instead of seeking safety in false disguises, Paul encouraged the Galatians to “clothe themselves with Christ;” (3:27) not with the trappings of a “recognized religion.” Paul called for the Galatians “to believe God” as Abraham (3:6) when they were tempted to conform for safety’s sake.

Lynne Hybels, co-founder of Willow Creek Community Church in Illinois *Sojourners* May 2010

WRITES...Twice in two years I traveled with a humanitarian organization to Croatia and Bosnia as those countries were being ripped apart by war with Serbia. In Croatia, we visited refugee centers filled with women who had lost everything....These are all your sisters, I sensed God saying. Croatian Catholics. Bosnian Muslims. Serbian Orthodox. They—and every other woman you will ever meet—are all your sisters. And every man you will ever meet is your brother. Whether they know it or not, they are all part of the human family I have created, and I love them. That’s what happens when you open your mind and heart to God and the world God created: You end up with a huge family. And you realize that every single member of the family is as important to God as you are. This changes everything

Months later, I listened as a mother of eight, living in the destitution of a refugee camp in a war-torn region of the Democratic Republic of Congo, described her brutal rape by rebel

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soldiers. When she showed me the beautiful, two-week-old child born of that rape, I knew beyond a shadow of doubt that her little boy meant every bit as much to God as my adored grandson does. This beautiful Congolese baby's health, safety, and future matter as much as my precious grandson's health, safety, and future. On a recent trip to the Holy Land, I met with a group of Israeli and Palestinian women who have lost children to the violence of the ongoing conflict. In their shared grief, they have inspired one another to become activists for peace and justice for all people in the Holy Land. What a privilege it was to enter into the pain, the hard work, and the hope of all these sisters.

May we be willing to "enter into the pain, the hard work and the hope" of *all* of God's children. May we trust that the greatest differences between us are nothing compared to the power of the risen Christ to reconcile all things. And may the perfect love of God overcome all of our fears...as we seek to welcome one another in this fellowship...as we seek to welcome the people of the world - as brothers and sisters "clothed in Christ." "We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. 1 John 4:19) AMEN