

Our Epistle lesson this morning is from Galatians chapter 6. This is the end of St. Paul's letter to the Church of Galatia, which is in the center of what we know as modern day Turkey. This church started well, but their faith had been compromised by teachers who we know as the Judaizers, because they attempted to change the precepts of Christ into something that was more compatible with Jewish belief. Christianity, however, was not just an improvisation upon the Old Covenant, it was the Old Covenant transformed by Christ into the New Covenant in Christ's blood. It was no longer compatible with the old. The Judaizers were leading the Galatian believers astray.

In particular, these teachers tried to convince the Galatian Christians that they need to be circumcised. Our passage this morning cites a couple of reasons:

1. To escape persecution. Judaism was somewhat tolerated by the Romans so if the Christians could package themselves as Jews, then they too might escape persecution by the Pagans around them. Also the Jews did not like the Christians, which they viewed as a heretical offshoot, a corruption, of their faith, and the Jews were always stirring up people against Paul and his companions. So if by including circumcision Christianity could be packaged as a closer offshoot to Judaism, then the Christians might escape rejection and persecution.
2. To feel good about themselves, or to feel superior by "glorying in the flesh of others." St. Paul implies that as these converts were circumcised, it added validity to their position. "Look," they said, "at all of these other people who agree with us." Paul says, "For neither they themselves who are circumcised keep the law; but desire to have you circumcised, that they may glory in your flesh." The more people they could convinced to join their side, their team, by becoming circumcised, the more validated they felt. We might think of it as similar to an evangelist bragging about how many people he convinced to say the sinners prayer.

This second point is really what we are focusing upon today for our common human temptation is to measure our “success” in relation to others. Underlying this position is an assumption about what success is: that greater numbers of adherents mean that a position is true. The more people we can convince to follow us, the more validated we are in our beliefs. Or conversely that being correct will lead to more followers.

The problem with this way of thinking is ... well ... that it is wrong. The things that are most appealing to human beings, which are immediately attractive, which are easy to consume, are the things which leave us exactly as we are, self-centered, self-satisfied, and fallen, far from God. If you are tempted to go with the crowd because, “If everyone is doing it, then it must be ok,” or, “If the important people believe it, it must be true,” then you are likely headed towards disaster. In fact, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says this, “Enter by the narrow gate; for wide *is* the gate and broad *is* the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow *is* the gate and difficult *is* the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.” (Matthew 7:13,14).

Let us put it this way: if you are looking around at the large number of people who are doing what you are doing and concluding that you must be doing things correctly, then you are being foolish. Do not glory in the flesh of others. Do not feel self-satisfied because you are on the winning team. That very well may be is the broad way that leads to destruction.

Now, some of you may hear what I’m saying and thus determine for themselves that you have to do something different. You aren’t going to follow the crowds, you are going to be unique. You are going to do it your own way. When the crowd zigs, you are going to zag! When they flip, you are going to flop. You’ll show them alright! Now this impulse is the opposite side of the same coin. Instead of taking pride in joining the crowd, there is a pride in opposing the crowd. This is the appeal to “I am unique and special and therefore better than

all those other people.” The problem here is that truth is still being measure relative to the crowd. Truth must be measured only relative to God. His is the only vote that counts. The only question we must ask is are we living in accordance with His Truth.

In the church, we often see this as novel interpretations of biblical passages. If someone comes up with an interpretation of scripture that doesn't sit quite right and that no one else agrees with, then they may actually be claiming to have some type of special spiritual insight. Our warning flags should go up. Often, such unique interpretations then become the foundation of a new sect – think Jehovah's witnesses. Think Seventh-day Adventists. Think about those groups who are reviving a modern type of Judaism by eating kosher as a means of superior spirituality. Think about the Charismatics who make speaking in tongues a sort of next-level encounter with God. All of these started with individual interpretations that become theological innovations which provide the basis of a new Christian sect.

Innovation and uniqueness do not guarantee theological soundness. They typically lead to division. Just because you are doing something new and different from everyone else, just because you are all alone and not following the crowd, does not mean that you are following Jesus correctly. It does not mean that you have taken hold of the Truth of Christ.

We cannot judge our spiritual understanding or our righteousness by either the crowds that agree with us or by the isolation our position may cause. Do not look at what other people are currently doing to evaluate your spiritual standing before Christ. Do not glory in the flesh of others, do not glory in alienating others. As St. Paul says, we must glory only in the cross of Christ. Our eyes must be fixed only upon Jesus, our hearts must be set only upon obedience to Him, our wills must be steadfast in following Christ, come what may.

So what does this look like practically for the believer? First of all, it means that we must

refrain from obtaining validation from others – whether that be taking comfort from the many others that believe as we do or from the fact that we are all alone in our convictions. We must determine only to seek Jesus, whether or not we find solidarity with the multitude or need to go our way in solitude. There will be times when we need to follow our convictions and this may mean, as it often has for the saints of the past, that we are all alone. Is your faith strong enough to carry on all by yourself? When the whole world seems against you, will you be able to press on, faithfully following Jesus alone?

On the other hand, when numerical successes come, again, as they have come during various revivals of the past, will you refrain from boasting – either to others or even within yourself – of these successes? Will you refrain from being self-satisfied because of what appears to be a great achievement according to the world. God does not see as the world sees. Be pleased with only what pleases God – a lively faith in Christ which leads to loving obedience to Him. Christianity is about Christ. We must have Him firmly centered in our faith and practice, and be indifferent to the apparent success or failure of numbers.

Of course this posture relative to matters of faith presumes that we have a core of belief. So – and here is the second brief part of this homily - if I don't define my faith by the popularity of a particular doctrine, and I am cautiously restrained in innovating my own unique interpretations, then what am I justified in believing? What exactly is "the faith"? How do I know what I am to believe?

When it comes down to it, this is really a matter of authority. Put another way, "Who do I believe?" First, we know that the special revelation given to us is the Holy Scripture. This is our final authority. However, all of the sects and heresies out there also appeal to Holy Scripture. What we really need is an interpretive authority, and for this we turn to the Church, particularly, the early church – that which is closest to the Apostles, closest to Christ

in history.

First of all, they formulated the Creeds – particularly the Apostles, the Nicene, and the Athanasian Creeds – these are the interpretive lenses through which we read scripture. If someone preaches something contrary to the creeds, then we should reject that interpretation. Secondly, we have the testimony of the early church contained in the stories and writing of the leaders of the early church, often called the Church Fathers. If we hear doctrine that is contrary to or incompatible with the tradition that we have received, we must reject it.

On the other hand, there is a lot of variation within what we would call orthodoxy – perhaps more than we are comfortable with in fact. We should be careful not to condemn others too quickly, and we should be that much more careful to make sure that we are well-grounded in our understanding of the faith and discipline in our lives. Let us be as generous towards others as we are able and, at the same time, detailed in working out our own faith and living out that faith.

Now if your impression of the above is, “Wow, that sounds hard,” then I think you are getting what I am saying. Recall that Jesus said, “Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.” Working out what you believe and why you believe it and then living that faith, is the challenge of life. It is a difficult path as Our Lord said it would be. As mentioned before, we have guidance from the Church, but you, each one of you, have to make this faith that we have received from those who have gone before us, your very own. Just going with the crowd will not cut it, even if the crowd is right.

Maybe, the word we are looking for to describe the faith that we desire to have, is “resilient”. We want to have a resilient faith – one that will not be easily led astray or undermined when

facing difficulties, one that will not quickly take the easy path, but a faith that will seek the true path without regard to the difficulty it may introduce to us.

If I were to ask you how to develop a resilient faith, you probably would have some answers such as: worship consistently at a sound church (for this will form our hearts in the truth), read, study, and memorize the Word of God (this will help us to recognize what is and is not the truth), and read and study and evaluate the Church Fathers and other Christian authors (which will teach us about the deposit of faith which we have received). To this I respond with an hearty, "Yes!" All of these things are good and necessary in order to better understand what is true and to condemn that which is false. Do these three, Worship, study the Word of God, and read about the faith, and you will do well.

The Galatians of St. Paul's day did not have a complete set of the tools available to them that we have. They were easily led astray and had to be corrected by the Apostle. Let us not be so easily manipulated. Let us use the gifts of the church for the strengthening of our souls. And let us always have confidence that God will protect and defend His church and bring us all into everlasting life.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.