

Now That Faith Has Come

It's such a small thing. Maybe too much to hang these notes upon, I'll admit that. Sometimes we preachers get carried away with small things, things that most folks would just skip over. And maybe they are things worth skipping over. Perhaps if we just focused on the big picture, we wouldn't get ourselves tangled into such big knots. Maybe if we didn't spend so much time on tiny things, we would have less conflict in the body.

Our passage for this week is a big-picture kind of thing. "Now that faith has come" speaks of a grand change or a new reality. Something big has happened; something transforming and world-altering. Perhaps we would be better served by focusing on that. This week, we are drawing a grand design, glimpsing the kingdom in our verses. So, we should stand on the mountaintop and gaze in wonder, slip on the wide-angle lens, and capture the vista that opens before us. It will take our breath away. Our jaws will drop at the glory; our hearts will pound at the vision. It will seem too beautiful, too powerful, too hopeful. Almost unattainable.

Almost unattainable. The big picture is what captures us, but we often turn away because it seems out of reach. It seems beyond our capacity. We ache to live in that vision, yet our hearts betray us; our wills fail us; our strength deserts us. Sometimes a focus on the big picture leads us to despair. "How long, O Lord?" the psalmist wondered when the big picture stayed consistently out of reach.

Sometimes we have to look closer, down to the detail, to the small things that seem insignificant, yet might be within our reach or understanding. Those small things might move us closer.

OK, enough suspense, right? What are we talking about? We're looking at these familiar words from Paul's Letter to the Galatians, chapter 3, verses 23 through 29.

Let's start with the big picture, shall we? It's right there in verse 28. The image of the church and the world without barriers. It is about acceptance and equality. This is a picture of a community that gets along because it values everyone;

everyone is respected and honored. There is no such thing as a second-class citizen. Sounds wonderful, doesn't it?

But wait, it gets even better. Earlier in the passage is the idea that we no longer need the law. The function of the law, says Paul, was to keep us in line. It was a diagnostic tool; it showed us our failings. The law was not about making us better; it was about disciplining us. It didn't change hearts. But now we don't need it anymore, because hearts have changed. We keep within the bounds of the law because we want to. That is how we choose to live; that is what defines us; that is who we are.

At least, that is who we can be. It's who we want to be, isn't it? At our best, we do. And that is the problem. We are so aware of our shortcomings and prejudices that we know such a vision is beyond us. We try; we really try to love our neighbors. We try to see the face of Jesus in those around us. We generate the energy; we grit our teeth and put our backs into it. We live in a culture that values individual effort. The bookstores are lined with shelf after shelf of self-help materials, all telling us that we can do it if we try hard enough. So, we try. And we can't do it.

It simply isn't within us to love as Jesus loved. As much as we would like to think we could do it, we can't. And this is where the despair kicks in. This is where the big-picture vision begins to wear on us. This is where, if we're honest, we want to give up. It's a dream, some argue, a pipe dream. It would be better to turn back to the law, to legislate our morality. Except even there, we fail. Paul told us we would, so we shouldn't be surprised that the law doesn't work any better than will.

So, where do we go from there? We as much as admitted that there's nothing we can do. So, what's left? A preposition. Such a tiny thing, yet it might mean the difference between despair and hope. Three letters in Greek - *eis*. In English, we use four letters - into. It makes all the difference in the world.

Look back at verse 27. That is the verse that sets up the vision of the true community that appears in the next verse. Paul is saying without 27, verse 28 can't and won't happen. And what is in verse 27? Baptism.

Uh, right. A little water on our heads, and we are all different. Everything becomes possible with a ritual and symbolic action. Right? Then why haven't we been doing a better job of it? Why can't the church, which has been doing the baptism thing for thousands of years, get it right, live the vision, and create the community?

Because of the preposition. Read it again. "As many of you as were baptized into Christ..." *Into*. Paul implies a direction, a process. Our baptism is not simply an outward sign; it is an inward grace, to use the old description of the sacrament. Inward grace is a process of transformation. Keep reading: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ." We're getting dressed. We aren't dressed yet because we don't yet look like Christ, but we are getting dressed. Or maybe: we are "being dressed. It is like having a helper because the garments are too difficult for us. We need other hands to button the buttons and tie the ties.

And those other hands are Christ's. By being baptized into Christ, we are letting Christ take over; we are letting Christ's will supplant our wills. We are letting Christ dress us so that we might live into the vision of the kingdom (and maybe this helps us understand that parable about the wedding garment!) We have to be properly dressed in the uniform of the reign of God. Hold onto the vision as we live into Christ.