

In It Together

**Ps 9:9-20 and Galatians 6:1-6 – Sermon Text = Gal 6:2
414, 590, 472, 478**

***Bear one another's burdens,
and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.***

(Galatians 6:2)

I messed up – again – last week.
You probably noticed the painting of the Apostle Paul
that Seolgi had put into the Power Point at my request,
then had up on the screen while I was preaching.

And I completely ignored it!

Well, not this week.

I thought it would be an interesting addition to our reflections
to have some of the great paintings of the apostle
to complement his words and our ponderings.



This one is attributed to Valentin de Boulogne,
a French painter living in Italy during the early 1600s.
It captures for me the Scriptural scholar in Paul,
carefully considering the texts of the Bible
as he writes his letters.

One thing that has intrigued me in looking for these images
is the frequency with which the sword shows up in the paintings –
in this one just behind Paul on your right.
I had not thought of Paul in militaristic terms.

But a little research uncovered the origins of the symbol.

In Ephesians 6, where Paul talks about the whole armour of God, he speaks of “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” (Eph. 6:17b) Interestingly enough, the sword is the only offensive piece of armour mentioned. Everything else in the passage – the belt, the breastplate, the shoes and the shield – are for defence against rulers, against authorities, and against “the cosmic powers of this present darkness.”

Now, we have come to know that, for Paul,
the ‘word of God’ is Jesus himself,
God’s living word in our midst by the work of the Holy Spirit.
This is the God of the Gospel,
the Creator of all who took flesh and dwelt among us in grace and truth.
This was God’s way of being our Redeemer,
inviting us to see things differently so that we might live differently.
God is the Sustainer of those new attitudes and behaviours
through the continual presence of his Holy Spirit.
So, the ‘Word’ that is Paul’s sword
is that power that cuts through all darkness and evil
to reconcile all humanity to the God of the Gospel
and offer an new way of being in and for the world.

This new way of being is empathy,
bearing one another’s burdens,
loving our neighbours as ourselves
in gratitude for God’s unconditional love for all of us.

We are all in this new way of being together,
gifted in Jesus Christ with everything needed to flourish
and working together to bless the whole creation.

That is the ‘law’ of Christ
that Paul talks of as he concludes Galatians,
that great hymn to Christian freedom
that we have been pondering for these past few weeks.
In essence, it is the ‘law’ of gratitude and empathy.

But because it is Christ’s ‘law,’
it does not have the imposing heaviness of the old Jewish law,
of the demanding details of the purity laws so common in Paul’s day.
This was the law against which Paul fought with all his might
following that revelation on the Damascus road
of what the law of Christ really was –
a freeing redemption through the love of God that inspires thanks.

As Matthew remembered Jesus saying:

*Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me;
For I am gentle and humble in heart,
And you will find rest for your souls.
For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.
(Matt 11:29-30)*

That assurance in the middle of Matthew's interpretation of the Gospel comes right after Jesus gives thanks to his Father for revealing his loving will in and through Jesus.

So, again, the 'law' of Christ is gratitude and empathy. We bear one another's burdens out of gratitude for God's freeing love. The Christian life is one of what we 'may' do, not what we 'must' do. It's about what you get to do, not what you have to do.

Easy to apply, don't you think?

Let's bring that newspaper we referred to last week back into conversation with the Bible.

This week the newspaper was filled with the mass murder of nine black Christians who had gathered to study the law of Christ in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC.

Here's the way the Emanuel website invited people to that Bible study:

Is something missing from your life? Are you doing all you can to have a closer relationship with God? If you have a desire to learn more about God, then join us on Wednesdays at 6:00 p.m. in the lower level of the church. We look forward to seeing you!

One of the people who joined them last Wednesday was a young white racist.

He sat listening to the law of Christ for an hour before opening fire and killing nine people, nine beloved children of the God of the Gospel.

This resistance to and violence against the law of Christ was all too familiar to Paul in the midst of the imperial power and the religious rigidity of his age.

But if you had kept reading for a few days, through until this young white racist had appeared in court, through until the statements of the families of the murdered were recorded, you would have found out something about how the law of Christ had been nourished in Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church since its founding in 1816.

For almost 200 years, it has stood for the law of Christ
by bearing each other's burdens,
and the burdens of the blacks in the US over those years have been many.

What emerged from this community formed around and by the law of Christ
was simple, surprising, and inspiring.
It was forgiveness!

Here are the words of the daughter of 70-year-old Ethel Lance,
murdered at Bible study last Wednesday in Charleston, SC:

*You took something very precious from me, but I forgive you. It hurts me. You hurt a lot
of people, but may God forgive you.*

“What?” you say!
“Forgive that little piece of white trash?
You want us to forgive him?
What kind of weird bread and wine have you been drinking?”

But that's it, isn't it?
They have been drinking the bread and wine of Christ's law,
the law of gratitude and empathy,
the law of love,
the law that frees them from the power of this present darkness.

I'm sure the words of Nelson Mandela
have reverberated through that sanctuary at Emanuel more than once,
words like these:

Courage is not the absence of fear — it is inspiring others to move beyond it.

It takes the courage that arises from the law of Christ
to experience and express the freedom of forgiveness,
to wield the sword of the word of God's forgiving love as an alternative to revenge.

As we face in our own lives the kinds of hatred
we have seen displayed this week in Charlston,
let us find the courage and freedom that arises from the law of Christ,
as we bear each other's burdens.
We do that in prayerful acts of empathy
wherever we find God's rights to the dignity and worth of his creatures
being trampled, denied, and destroyed.

God bless those who forgive,
for they *are* the ambassadors of the coming of the Lord.