

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
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A Short Sermon Series on the Book of Galatians Part II – “Who Lives in Me...”

(Galatians 2:9-21 & 3:1-2) "...when James and Peter and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. 10 They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do. 11 But when Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned; 12 for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. 13 And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. 14 But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" 15 We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; 16 yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. 17 But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! 18 But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. 19 For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; 20 and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21 I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing. You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was

before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! 2 The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard?

The story has dominated airwaves and the internet this week, fueling tens of thousands of words from the mouths of cable tv's talking heads and from ordinary folks. It is a story that has generated passions that have run high, a story that reached into the very highest levels of the government. The story is, of course, the announcement by a Florida pastor – which was soon copy-catted by several others – that he would hold a Qu'ran burning day yesterday. And even though he ended up calling it off, there were several similar events of desecration around the country. How shall you and I as Christians think about this? How do we untangle and clarify our loves and loyalties to Christ and country? What might our faith ask of us in response to this? Well, sometimes a question about our present is best dealt with by a story from our past. Let me tell you one such story:

Most of those who awoke on that particular February 23rd had no reason to think that it would be a day much different from the day before. There was work to do, children to be fed and gotten to school, errands to be run, and all the thousand daily things that make up an ordinary day in ordinary lives. And yet for those who were Christians, the day would turn out to be far from ordinary. For, as was the custom among most of the Christians in that town, they would begin their days by going by the church. It was not too dissimilar, really, from all those folks who drop by our church on a given day, volunteering for a few hours, looking for an update on a hospitalized member, one of the Facilities Team members fixing one of the never-ending list of

things that need fixing, some dropping by just because they need to feel close to God.

But on that February day, such church visits in that town would be different. For suddenly and without warning the church doors were battered down and in poured a horde of men with torches and axes. They went into the sanctuary and began ransacking it, looking for the Bibles and then throwing them in a pile. And then they burned them. But they were not done. Soon another mob came with battering rams and sledge hammers and proceeded to knock that church down to the ground, looking among the rubble for more Bibles that could be burned. One of those church member shouted at the mob and cursed them for what they were doing. He was seized and tied down over that pile of burning Bibles and was slowly burned to death.

But all this was only a beginning of the horror. For months and then years every Christian in the town – and soon in the whole region as the madness spread – wondered every night upon going to bed whether they and their families would be dragged out of bed at 3 a.m. and watch their houses burned down in order destroy any Bibles they might have owned, and then be given the “choice” of renouncing their faith and then having stones chained to their necks and thrown into the ocean, or refusing to renounce their faith and be burned alive. The madness lasted for years, churches sacked, Bibles burned, Christians hunted down and tortured in hideous ways. Those who weren’t killed often were mutilated instead, losing a hand or ears or nose to madness.

The year was 303 and the man in charge of this was the Roman Emperor Diocletian and the town where this madness began on that February day was called Nicomedia, a town in what is now Turkey. Diocletian’s avowed aim was to burn every

Bible, destroy every church building, kill every Christian, and to wipe out Christianity. Why? Well, several reasons, some stated and some unstated. First of all, during those first three centuries after the death and resurrection of Jesus, his followers almost universally refused to serve in the military. This refusal was as common then among Christians as the wearing of crosses is now. And this enraged the Emperor. Moreover, as with their Jewish forebears, they refused to swear their first and highest allegiance to the Emperor, believing, instead, that their first and highest allegiance must be to God, and that if the dictates of their country were at odds with the teachings of their God and their Christ, that they could not, must not, ever confuse the two. The Emperor was also angry that Christians were the ones involved in making life better for those most miserable in society: they fed the hungry instead of letting them die, they set up orphanages which would take girl babies even though the Empire tacitly encouraged couples to kill female infants.

But the un-stated reason for Diocletian's fury was that he, as humans have done since day one, as you and I likely done on occasion to our shame, was taking his anxieties and his fears out on the helpless and the weak. For you see, the Roman Empire was slowly but surely coming apart. The reasons for that have been rehearsed by historians a thousand times but suffice it to say that in the midst of those anxieties, those fears, those worries about the future, Diocletian lashed out at Christians, blaming them for every ill that was besetting the Empire, refusing, thereby, to honestly look at and confess and seek to change the things about *Rome* that were the real causes of the disintegration. No, he preferred instead to lash out against those who were "the other," and – in an action that we see too often even yet today – slurring as "unpatriotic"

anyone who disagreed with him.

Our memories as Christians, and maybe particularly our memories as American Christians, are too short. The story of those good Christians in Nicomedia 1700 years ago is also still our story and we forget it at our peril. It is the same story that continues today in Laos and North Korea and China and too many other places where numerous organizations report each year on those countries' latter-day Diocletians who even this day burn Bibles, torture believers, destroy churches, and seek to stamp out Christianity. The story of those Laotian and Korean and Chinese Christians are also our stories and we should never cease in praying for them. But, my friends, those stories from Laos or Korea in 2010 or from ancient Rome in 303 face us with a choice: *will we be Christian or will we be the Emperor?* For you see, unlike in modern day Laos or Korea or ancient Rome, today WE are not the "other," WE are not the minority, we are not those who struggle against persecution. But once we were. None of us here today has had a family member threatened with torture if we don't renounce our faith. And yet that was once us.

But we do face other choices. Now, please know this: I am the first to denounce things like stoning to death of a 17-year-old caught up in love and hormones, or the mindset that encourages the mutilating women so they cannot take pleasure from sexual relations, or the vicious beating of a 13-year-old girl for the "crime" of licking an ice cream cone in public in a "provocative" way, or strapping bombs to 13-year-old boys and bribing their families to celebrate what is nothing more than mass murder, or of flying planes into office buildings. Those are hideous, awful, vile things. But I am

also aware, and need to confess, that hatred and demonizing others is the possession of no one religion, and *that people of whatever religion sometimes act in ways that are contrary to what their faith teaches*. Some of you in this room likely had German American ancestors who were vilified as not-really-Christian during World War I. The good Christian folks of one church in Selma, Alabama, who would not let African-Americans worship during the March on Selma and who, when they finally did, made sure that the deacons were told to serve them communion last so that white folks wouldn't have to be contaminated by touching the tokens of Christ's sacrifice that had been touched by black hands – they were following Diocletian not Christ. The pronouncements of some of our own Disciples magazines about the glorious opportunity to exterminate the evil Catholics during the Spanish American War and the war's being "the Lord's way of pointing us to our national duty"¹ were guided more by the Emperor than by the Savior. Hatred, vilification, intentional misunderstanding, and the demonizing of those who are not like us are not the sole possession of any one country, ethnic group, or religion.

Now, our opportunities to choose between Diocletian and Christ will not be so dramatic on most days. But they are there, they are there. If you have email, you no doubt get sent vicious anti-Muslim slurs. Don't pass them along. Instead of applauding

¹J.H. Garrison, editor, The Christian-Evangelist. Cited in Charles Blaisdell, "The Attitude of The Christian-Evangelist Toward the Spanish-America War," Encounter 50:3, Summer 1989, p 239. Another Garrison quote is even more disturbing: Admiral Dewey's victory at Manilla was "thrilling," an example of the great spiritual conflict, of the ships of Zion, panoplied with the armorplate of righteousness...." Ibid., pp. 238-239.

– or even just ignoring – those who forget that it was once Christians who had their sacred book burned and who confuse the evils a particular political ideology of exclusion and hate with a religion whose most central belief is that Muslims are obligated to offer acts of charity, give to a charity in their honor. Whether you count yourselves with those first three centuries’ worth of Christians who renounced the use of violence, be very, very slow to ever call for violence – and never as a first resort.

And you know what else? The violence of words and deeds – whether Bible burning or or Qu’ran burning or the demonizing those who are different – just so seldom works. The Diocletian persecution ended up strengthening the church, and in an ultimate irony, the next emperor made it the official religion of the Empire! Those German-Americans whose churches were harassed and persecuted during World War I became stronger. Those churches that demeaned the Body of Christ by refusing to let blacks touch the cup before whites simply made the civil rights movement stronger. The leaflet being circulated by Afghan insurgents telling them about the planned Qu’ran burning simply strengthens the Taliban’s hateful, hateful cause,² and putting at risk folks like our own Ryan and Bob and their brothers and sisters in uniform.

In our scripture for this morning, Paul is writing to churches not very far from where Emperor Diocletian would unleash his horrors 250 years later. At stake was the very meaning of the Gospel itself: the ever-urgent question as to whether there are in fact qualifications on whom God loves. Are there folks who are to be forever second-

²<http://blogs.abcnews.com/nightlinedailyline/2010/09/afghan-insurgents-distribute-leaflet-about-planned-koran-burning.html>

class? Is God's amazing and unconditional grace actually to be metered and filtered through our sometimes sinful beliefs about who should count, our sinful "isms" about race, class gender, sexual orientation, and even creeds? **That** is what Paul was so very passionate about, and **that** is also the question that yet faces you and me every day.

This is a long and dense passage, but Paul answers those questions with beautiful and oh-so-apt image near the end, when he says: *"it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me."* What does this mean? I think it means that at all times, but perhaps especially in times where there is a tension and anger and hurt and sinfulness and violence and exploitation in too many places in our world, that God is calling each of us to a kind of radical humility and asking each of us to seek to transcend our own perspectives. Now, I know this can be a hard thing to do in the face of those who would try to hurt and destroy under the leading of an evil ideology that shamefully uses and abuses an honorable religion, a religion that worships the same God as we and our Jewish brothers and sisters do. And yet God stands at the ready to help us to do so.

I think that IF Paul had been writing 250 years later, he might have said: ***"Is it Christ who lives in you or the emperor? Choose. Choose."*** And if we choose to have Christ live in us, this is what that will mean:

- Christ will ask us to think and do that which is best rather than to give in to that which is worst. So, is it Christ who lives in you or the Emperor? If you answer "Christ," then...
- Christ will ask you, when confronted by behavior in someone you don't

understand, to assume the best about that person instead of assuming the worst. So, is it Christ who lives in you or the Emperor? If you answer “Christ,” then...

- Christ will ask us to never, ever give in to cynical assessments of people or situations on first blush, for that makes it harder for God’s will to work in the world – and especially for God’s will to work in us! So, is it Christ who lives in you or the Emperor? If you answer “Christ,” then...
- Christ will ask you to try to love – even to try to love unconditionally! – in each and every encounter that you have. Nothing could be more simple. And yet nothing could be harder!

Will you choose Christ, or will you choose the Emperor?³

³I am grateful to the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell for her most helpful suggestions, especially regarding the ending.