

**June 19, 2016**

**TEXT: Galatians 3:15–29**

**TITLE: Broken Promises**

Brothers and sisters, I give an example from daily life: once a person's will has been ratified, no one adds to it or annuls it. Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring; it does not say, 'And to offsprings', as of many; but it says, 'And to your offspring', that is, to one person, who is Christ. My point is this: the law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. For if the inheritance comes from the law, it no longer comes from the promise; but God granted it to Abraham through the promise.

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made; and it was ordained through angels by a mediator. Now a mediator involves more than one party; but God is one. Is the law then opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could make alive, then righteousness would indeed come through the law. But the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

This has been a tragic, emotional and perhaps faith shaking week. The news of the people killed and injured at the Pulse Bar in Orlando had just begun to be reported as we gathered for worship last Sunday. Pastor Heather made reference to the tragedy in her sermon, but we didn't know the full extent or details of the tragedy until later—49 people killed, another 50+ injured, innumerable people frightened and traumatized by what they witnessed and were subjected to; the majority of the victims of Latino or Hispanic descent, 18–50 years old; people with varying backgrounds, experiences, professions, and aspirations, all out for a night of fun, celebration and relaxation—gunned down by an seriously disturbed man, possibly in denial about his own sexuality and professing an allegiance to Isis.

Unless we personally know or knew someone who was there, we can't begin to imagine the emotion and the pain the family members, friends, partners, spouses or co-workers of those killed, injured or traumatized are feeling. And yet, as several hundred of us gathered the very next evening in front of the City County Building to stand in solidarity with the City of Orlando and the victims, the sense of pain, disbelief, and sorrow were palpable. As Wil called out the names of the 49 victims Monday night, we lit candles and stood for those who could no longer stand for themselves. We stood against violence, prejudice and bigotry. We stood for peace and acceptance with our Muslim brothers and sisters who were equally hurting. Just as we had prayed and shared a meal with them on Sunday evening, and witnessed their pain, hurt, and disbelief as we attended and were honored with a Humanity Day award by the members of the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh.

Although, the attack last week was in a gay night club, in reality, the crime was against all humanity—those of us who understand and embrace the belief that in Christ Jesus there is no Jew, Gentile, male, female, slave or free. God's promise of love, justice, mercy and peace is for all of God's children. No distinction, descriptors or identifiers are necessary.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he addresses the issue that had arisen among the Jewish followers of Christ, the people of promise, those who considered themselves the real children of God. They thought it necessary to impose circumcision upon the Gentile followers, if in fact they were to become members of the new sect of Judaism. Never denying his Jewish roots, after his Damascus Road experience, Paul was profoundly convinced that Jesus is God's promised Messiah and that the Christian faith was the fulfillment of God's promises to God's people, non-Jews and Jews alike.

It appears we haven't come very far from the fledgling church in Galatia, thinking it necessary for us to define, designate and identify who belongs to God and who doesn't; imposing our suppositions, requirements and standards on others. Some espouse the good news of Jesus Christ, yet spend what seems like an inordinate amount of time trying to identify or sit in judgement of who the real people of God are or are not.

Christians from Europe came to this country, decided the Native Americans were not God's people, stole their land, slaughtered and pushed survivors into reservations. Christian slave owners, decreed that those they enslaved were not God's children, and without hesitation mistreated and beat them mercilessly sometimes to death, separated families, subjected them to unwanted sexual contact, and forced them to live in conditions unfit for animals. Some more recent zealous followers of God have inferred that Muslims are not God's people and therefore must be banned from coming into our country; and that taking up arms and owning more guns is the answer to unprovoked and senseless violence.

The pastor and members of the Westboro Church have discerned that GLBTQI people do not belong to God and are staging protests and hurling insults at the funerals and memorial services of some of the Orlando victims. They are putting themselves in the position to determine who the recipients of the promises of God are.

The Jewish followers of Christ in Galatia had placed themselves in a very similar position, concluding that if the Gentile were to be real followers of Christ they should submit themselves to the laws of Moses and specifically circumcision. Paul addressed this miss-information by pointing out that 430 years before the law was given to Moses, God counted Abraham as righteous by virtue of his faith. Paul reminded them that those who rely on the law are also cursed by the law, as it was virtually impossible to keep it in its entirety and that God's gift of grace and life is received only through faith, trust and belief in Christ Jesus who fulfilled the law with his sacrificial death on the cross. The true descendants of Abraham are not those who submit to circumcision, but those who walk by faith and not by sight.

Very simply stated, Paul affirmed that God's promises to Israel are not broken, but expanded, redefined; had made way for the inclusion of everyone who had faith. This morning we are reminded that God is still in the business of inclusion; of blessing those whom others would exclude and count as unrighteous. In light of the violence, vitriol and bombastic grandstanding we witness and fall victim to daily, it would be easy for us to point fingers and declare who is and isn't included in the family of God, who is and isn't included in the promises of God.

Perhaps those who carry out gun violence against families in Wilkinsburg, or in a South Carolina Church; or the GLTBQ community or politicians who argue and fight against gun control. Perhaps those who would deny people the opportunity to come to America from other countries or proclaim that those who worship God differently are terrorists. Perhaps those who are the perpetrators of spousal, gender or child abuse and neglect. Perhaps those who espouse hatred and exclusion for any reason; are they excluded from the promises of God? Only if they exclude themselves!

Beloved, God's promises are not broken. God has promised that light shall conquer darkness; goodness shall conquer evil; acceptance and inclusion shall conquer exclusion and division; peace shall conquer violence; harmony shall conquer discord and anger; joy shall conquer sorrow and sadness; and love shall always, always conquer hate!

Just as God was with Elijah, provided sustenance and assurance, and spoke to him in a still small voice, in order that Elijah would carry on. God leads us through these unthinkable, unimaginable, faith-shaking times. God has not left nor forsaken us. God is our hiding place; our refuge in a time of storm. Beloved, remain faithful and prayerful; encourage and empower those who are weak and heavy laden; stand for and speak what is righteous; be a blessing as God has blessed you; love even those who are unlovable. Listen and hear God's sometimes, small voice speaking provision, assurance and strength into our lives and life situations. And be assured that the world will know we are Christians by our love.

Amen.