

Sermon for Sunday, June 9, 2013 (Acolyte Graduation) Gal 1: 11-24 "Glorified Because of Me"

It's an odd thing, this day, because we celebrate and we grieve at the same time. We celebrate the accomplishments of our young people, the seniors who have served as acolytes for several years, as they graduate from high school. Each of them is beloved by their family and by us. We can tell stories about Sara's sweetness, Melissa's quiet intelligence, Megan's incredible focus as a horsewoman, Stark's fearlessness (and juggling), and Garrett's musical talents and scouting accomplishments. Each of them has unique gifts and abilities, and we have been blessed by their presence among us.

We are a little bit sad, too, because one of the inevitable parts of their growing up means that our relationships with them are changing. They are going off to college now. Some are attending schools near to us, some further away, but they are all moving to a different place in their life journeys, and we will not see them as often as we have in the past. That's the hard part, even as we wish them well.

But as they go from us, they carry something of their time with us with them and they leave something with us, and that something is encapsulated in the last phrase in today's reading from the Letter of Paul to the Galatians: "They glorified God because of me."

Now, before I explain how this applies to our five senior acolytes, let's think a little bit about this letter, and who the Galatians were, and what Paul was doing in this letter.

Galatia was an interesting place. It was a Roman province in Central Asia, and had been settled by a group of Celts from Gaul (modern day France) in 270 BC. This group of foreigners, even in Paul's day, still retained some cultural and linguistic practices of those Gaulish roots. So they were strangers in a strange land, even almost three hundred years after they had emigrated from what we now might know as the region of Brittany in western France.

Paul had visited Galatia and started a church there. He converted a number of these Galatians from their pagan religions. This was a common practice for Paul – he was an itinerant evangelist, going from place to place as the Spirit led him, to convert people (especially non-Jews, what we call Gentiles) from their old religions to the way of Christ. Then, once the church was started up and running, he left.

That was the norm for Paul. It was also the norm that his churches would send him letters every now and again. Sometimes they had questions, sometimes they had disputes that needed settling, sometimes they were simply reported on what was happening, but there was a pattern of letters.

We have none of the letters sent to Paul, but we do have copies of the letters Paul sent in response. We have none of the original letters, but we do have copies. In the case of the letter to the Galatians, the earliest known copy is from around 200 CE, about 150 years after the original was believed to have been written.

What was going on in this letter? It appears that there were some new teachers who came to Galatia after Paul founded the church there. These new teachers were teaching a different approach to the way of Christ – they said that converts had to conform to all the rules of Jewish law. In other words, they had to become Jews first, and then they could become Christians. And those whom Paul had taught wrote to him and told him about this, and this letter to the Galatians was intended to set them straight. The new teachers were wrong. Paul had received Jesus' words in a revelation when he

was converted, and there was nothing in that revelation about having to become a good Jew before you could become a Christian. So Paul was writing to set the record straight.

And he set the record straight in a very unusual way: he started out by talking about his credentials as a "good Jew." Paul was a Pharisee and a persecutor of Christians prior to that revelation when he was knocked off his horse. His argument was that if he, even this very observant Jew, believed that it was not necessary to adhere to Jewish law, to become an observant Jew, before one became a Christian, and that if he followed this belief because of Jesus' own revelation to him, then these new teachers' arguments were wrong. And if, as most Biblical scholars believe, this letter was written after Paul had argued with Peter about this very same question at the Council of Jerusalem and had gotten Peter's concurrence that Gentiles did not need to become Jews before becoming Christians, Paul was arguing from a position of great strength and these new folks were very wrong.

And after Paul establishes his credentials, he notes that the Jewish Christians who heard about him rejoiced – "this is somebody who came from Judaism to Christ and is converting many people to the way of Christ" – and they said that God was glorified because of what Paul was doing.

So what does that have to do with these graduating acolytes?

Well, the fact is that they are an integral part of our worship each Sunday. Their focus and precision, their ability to contribute beauty and grace to each thing we do during worship, are well known. Folks who are new to the parish are fascinated by their intensity. All of that is to say that they glorify God in their work as acolytes, and we glorify God because of the mood that they set in our worship. We pray together immediately before the service, that we can shine a light on God by our work at the altar, and it is clear that the prayer works: these young people are a light to the nations when they serve as acolytes.

But it is not just as acolytes that they and we glorify God. Some of them have participated in our mission trips, and I've seen them work incredibly hard at helping others, and I've also seen them treating the folks whom we help with respect and dignity. They see the grace and humanity of Christ in those whom we help, and those whom we help see the love and care of Christ in those teens. I've seen them work to help with younger children, who see them as the cool older kids. They always are kind and generous to the little ones, and when they teach the acolyte procedures to newer participants, they do it with care and good humor. God is with them, and God is glorified by their work.

Although I haven't seen them in school, I would imagine that they live their faith in their kindness to other classmates, in their willingness to lend a helping hand, in their use of their God-given intelligence in their class work. God is glorified by their work.

In a few months, they will be starting in a new school, a college or a university. They may have part-time jobs as well. They will be among different people, doing different things, engaging in different tasks. But one thing remains the same: we pray that in all they do, they can say "God was glorified because of me." They already know how to make that happen – they merely need to continue being the wonderful young adults they already are. They merely need to center their lives and their work in what God has made them for. We pray that this time next year, or five years from now, or a decade from now, or a lifetime from now, they will be able to say what they can truly say today: "God was glorified because of me!"

Amen.