

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA 22310
July 4, 2010

Luke 10: 1–11; 16–20
Galatians 6:1–10

PLANTING TO PLEASE GOD

Even Peterson's retelling of the story in *The Message*, in words that are more familiar, couldn't disguise that Jesus was a little less than cordial (Wasn't He?) about instructions to believers and non-believers. "The only thing we got from you was the dust on our feet and we give that back." Sounds a little bit like the advertisement on the side of the refuse truck that guaranteed, "You'll be satisfied or double your garbage back." Right? "Dust," Jesus tells the seventy, and "Move on." What is he really saying? It is not an insult that Jesus encourages us to practice. But, rather, it is encouragement to be single-minded when we seek to serve God.

And in many ways the book of Galatians offers instructions that are like the words Jesus offered to the seventy. The church is to be very clear about its purpose. Every church, indeed, every believer is to understand that we are offered the gift of peace—the freedom from fear because we've been reconciled—set right—with God. Literally, the word that is used by Paul is the term that's used when someone has their shoulder knocked out of place and popped back in. It gives you chills just to think of it, doesn't it?

The snap back into place is painful, and yet it's restorative. Being reconciled to God has a specific outcome. And our lives are changed each time we allow our temperament to be quieted. How often have we seen our faith erode when we give into contentious, excessive competitiveness and over-confidence? Like spoiled children, we forget that we have been saved for the sake of Jesus.

It is Paul's intention in Galatians to correct those natural tendencies that creep in and permeate when we lean only to human understanding. Paul says, "Pride tempts us to think too highly of ourselves." Jesus says, "Be cautious and be grateful for what God has provided rather than what you have done for yourself."

What are the real issues facing that church in Galatia?—the same issues that face the church today, the same temptations. Some in the church had become condescending to others. Have you ever been tempted to be condescending to another member of Bush Hill Church? Have you ever been less than gentle in your conversation? Have you ever given in to that tendency to be a little over critical or judgmental when someone else falls short or makes a mistake?

I'm glad we only have one of our Wesley seminarians here because I don't quote John Wesley very often, and I don't want to be named for quoting him too often. But he says that if a man endeavors to cure another without preserving his own meekness, that man easily succumbs to the same temptation. Jesus expects us—no, Jesus demands—that we offer one another peace and a spirit of contentment. Don't go around town looking

for the best cook or the best place to stay. Be content with what is put in front of you; but, how easily the church becomes uncaring, even harsh, because its members are not content.

You know I've been doing this or something like this for over thirty-one years, and I am still caught off guard every time a Christian snaps at another Christian. I just still don't expect it after all this time. When we react violently or suddenly; when we take each other or ourselves and disrupt those around us; when we shatter the communal life of the church, I'm still surprised. It is so foreign to everything God has given us. It is so opposite of who we have been called to be. And each time I wonder—do we know what kind of seeds we are planting? With our words, what are we sowing—an embrace? God is not mocked. God is not caught off guard. What does this mean? It means if we sow only those things that make us look good, it's pretty hard to avoid self-deception. We begin to believe our own press.

Paul says stretch yourself in doing what is right spiritually. And spiritual work, for those who still struggle with those words, is always the work that is good for all. Spiritual work is what we do for one another so that those outside the church will recognize that there is something very different taking place in our midst the way our love for one another isn't something we take for granted.

There's a Benedictine nun, Joan Chittister, who explains that in ancient times, being part of the Christian community meant defying Roman imperialism. It meant stretching Judaism. It means countering pagan values with Christian ones. Joan says that there is a time when discipleship meant the rejection of emperor worship, the forsaking of animal sacrifice, the inclusion of Gentiles, the elimination of dietary laws, the acceptance of women, and the supplanting of law with love.

Being a disciple in today's world is no less challenging. It requires a commitment to be, in our world, what Jesus called a healer—a voice, a sign of God's design with justice and love. It infers that this confirming love of Jesus is for everyone no matter who tries to draw a line around God's acceptance.

Being a disciple means making life better for others. It means going beyond our lives to improve the lives of others, all the while holding Paul's words, intended with that command, that everyone is required to be involved, to carry their load. This gift—this transforming life-giving faith—is more important than padding our pews with new members. Yes, it is slow, and yes, like putting a shoulder back in place, sometimes it is painful. But it is also healing. And if we know anything in our midst, we know healing takes time. It takes hard work.

So let me encourage you. Instead of finger-pointing and trying to find out who needs to do more—who's in the 20 percent doing 80 percent of the work and who isn't—let's practice some mutual support. Let's practice carrying our load and being thrilled that God has included us in what God is doing here.

What does Paul teach us in verse 14? Paul says, “May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord, Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world.”

The words that God has offered for us are words of gentleness, words of reconciliation and restoration—reconciling words that put our rebellious spirits back in perspective. And we are grateful for what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. It is the same today, yesterday, and always. And will be the same until our Savior returns.

Amen.