

“Indelible Blessing”
 Sermon for 30 October 2016
 Text: Galatians 3:14-18 & John 8:31-47

Something really, really big came into being by, that is, came to pass through the crucifixion of Jesus. Some have called it the watershed moment, others declare it to be the hinge, or the pivot point of history. Paul wants us to know that this event is connected to the promise of God to Abraham, or “Abraham’s blessing.” Up until that break-through moment, there existed a wall of separation between the Jews as God’s Chosen People and the rest of us, the Gentiles so-called. Up until this point, the Mosaic covenant, the covenant of the Law, effectively *shut them out* as “unclean.” This “wall” was a wall of long duration, but, apparently, it was a temporary wall. It was a real barrier, and on one side of the wall—that is, prior to the crucifixion to view things temporarily as contrasted with spatially—one the far side of the wall were the ritual observances, feast days and ceremonial laws of the Jews (their distinctive’s so to speak, or their cultural and religious features *which sensed them in!*). Temporary abatements of sin, acts of repentance as proscribed by the laws through the temple cult, were among those distinctive’s and that is how, *legalistically*, sin and forgiveness were managed by faithful Jews. Those who were faithful, whose hearts were broken and contrite, could address their sin, obtain forgiveness (*this entails both justification (vv8,9) and empowerment (v.14)*) and get on with life. But on the near side, prior to the crucifixion, there was lots of religious activity but, in the main, those activities were futile, vain . . . useless, if not offensive to God. Paganism and false religion only deepen the alienation of sinners from God and heighten the offense.

There are three Greek words used for “redemption” (so translated in English): 1. *lutrow*, meaning to loose, set free; 2. *agorazo*, meaning to buy at the marketplace, as in purchase; and 3. *exagorazo*, meaning to buy out of the marketplace *and this last is the word used here (v. 13)*. The implication is that we are in bondage, as in “sold out to the world,” a legal condition of ownership (slavery indeed was a legal state, or standing—we are “redeemed” as if purchased off the slave block and so freed!). This is where the phrase “bought with a price” has its origin. These considerations were operative in the discourse of Jesus recorded in John 8:31ff. There Jesus raises the matter of legal bondage when He asserts: **You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free** (as in redeem you, loose you from slavery). The Jews, **who believed on Him**, object: **We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone.** (v.33 They must have been thinking of their personal experience and not their historical one—obviously Egypt, Midian, Philistia, Assyria, Babylon, Greece and Persia and Rome all come to mind!) The discussion moves on to include the matter of different fathers (Father God versus the Devil) and different households (of faith and of unbelief). The key phrase **the works of Abraham** is introduced here and it refers to **faith, believing God, trusting in the promise**. Then Jesus asserts: **Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word.** Jesus appears to be accusing them of deliberate misunderstanding, or of a misunderstanding that arises from being raised in a house of bad character, yes, even the household of the Devil. I draw your attention to the words, **My word**. To what could this allude if not to the Word, the gospel (great news) that Jesus came proclaiming in Galilee (as recorded in Mark 1:15! This is the Word of

John 8:31 in which we **are to abide. . . to “hear”. . . and “believe.”** Jesus had received this Word from the Father (God) and the Jews had received a contradictory word from their father, the Devil!

It is a fact that people do what they have learned to do under the tutelage of their fathers, for better or for worse! We learn to conform to the *works* (vv. 41,43) and *desires* (v.44) of our spiritual head, our “owner/father.” *Therefore we may struggle to understand Jesus, in part, because we grew up in a lying household, as those who are subject to the world, our flesh and the Devil.* Bad character and bad habits are inhibiting factors (to believing Jesus) *potentially* found in our upbringing! Some are blessed with an upbringing in a godly home where faith is real and good character abounds—and godly habits are cultivated! Where God is served with reverence and joy. Jesus is not addressing folks with those advantages! **You do not understand me and you cannot bear to hear My word because You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires.** (vv. 43-44). That is why **you cannot abide the truth.** (v.44) I believe that this is an accurate take on the discourse in view because of Jesus’ conclusion to the matter: **Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not of God.** (v.47) What a hopeful thing it is then to realize that you “hear” the words of God!

Before we leave John 8, I would be remiss if I failed to highlight the allusions to Abraham salted throughout this exchange. First (v.33) we have the Jews’ claim that they are **offspring of Abraham.** Jesus notes this assertion of physical descent: **I know you are offspring of Abraham** (physically) but spiritually something is not lining up **yet you seek to kill me because My word finds no place in you.** (v.37) The Jews respond indignantly, **Abraham is our father.** (v.39) Jesus replies, **If you were Abraham’s children, you would do the works that Abraham did . . . If God were your father, you would love Me, for I came from my father and I am here.** (v.42) Clearly Jesus wants them to consider that Abraham loved Him even if they don’t. *We are truly not very far from Galatians 3:14 so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we receive the promised Spirit through faith.* Abraham takes center stage when Jesus answers the question: **Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died?** We know, by faith, that Abraham lives. Jesus also affirms resurrection life but He also says, **Abraham rejoiced that he would see My day. He saw it and was glad.” So the Jews said to Him, “You are not yet fifty years, old and have you seen Abraham?”** Jesus’ reply is one of the great “I am” declarations in John: **Truly, truly I say unto you, before Abraham was, I am**” that the Jews heard this as a clear declaration of divinity is evidenced by their actions. **So they picked up stones to throw at Him . . .** So we see that Abraham is everywhere in this discourse and the implications of that for the **blessing of Abraham** in Galatians are profound. For the sake of the Jews in Galatia, Paul might have delved into the controversies of John 8 (he certainly knew of it!) but being’s as his audience is Gentile, he goes more lightly here.

However, let’s return our attention to the crucifixion of Jesus, to a salvation coming by faith rather than by works of righteousness and obedient observation. A way was opened up—**other than works of the Law and legalism!** Faith has` always been operative but the Law having served its purpose, preparing the world for

the coming of the Christ, was superseded by a new covenant, a covenant of grace. The main feature of this new covenant was the blessing of the Holy Spirit—that is, the impartation of the Holy Spirit which follows from uniting with Christ by saving faith. The blessing, as it were, materialized in Jesus, took on human form; it was immanent in Jesus Christ. When by faith we are grafted into the vine, we obtain our life from the vine . . . and so bear much fruit. **Apart from Me, you can nothing do.** (John 15:5) There are several passages expanding this theme of *the blessing*:

His grace which He freely bestowed upon us in the Beloved, in whom we have our redemption. (Eph. 1:6-7)

In Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, you are made full in Him. (Col. 2:10)

When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son . . . to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying “Abba, Father!” So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then, an heir through God. (Galatians 4:4-7)

In the great scheme of things, it would appear that the Law and the Spirit cannot co-exist and, further, that they exist in succession: first the Law and then Christ and then the Spirit. The function of the Law is likened by Paul to a tutorship (a condition of being a “spiritual minor”—a mere child who does not yet have the rights, prerogatives and privileges of adulthood). In the case of the child state, the Law is largely external; it is enforced as it were from the outside, by the tutor (parents and the authorities). No one is born a saint! Therefore one is taught the rules, kept with bounds, and our *frowardness*, or, our sinful proclivities and outright rebellion, is restrained. The goal (and the hope) is maturity and self-government and those, on the individual level are manifest as self-control coupled with spiritual power and direction—control as exercised by a spiritual man. The indwelling Spirit is 1.) a spirit of adoption, 2.) a spirit of holiness and 3.) by that same Spirit, all the resources of resurrection power (i.e. all the resources of heaven and earth) are put at one’s disposal *enabling us* to love, worship, serve and obey God freely and fully! That freely is freely as in both spontaneous and sincere.

The child as child may chafe against the constraints of parental guidance. And so we have the testing of limits, pushing of boundaries, defiance and even dangerous independence—you know, the running out into the streets impulsivity (we delicately call this the “strong-willed child!”) However, the cuteness is wearing when it is revealed as *simply a mask* for open defiance and habitual wicked rebellion. If the child gets the idea that he can do life “his way,” it can easily harden into a habit, or disposition that bodes poorly for his future. However, the adult looks back, *if he survives childhood*, on these days with relief (“I don’t know how I survived!”) and gratitude (“Thank God my parents knew the word “no” and how to use it!”). This is the primary function and understanding of the Law.

Later, this earlier view of the Law modulates. He observes, “I see now that the Law demonstrates the holy character of God—that my parents embodied the presence of God as Lawgiver and, despite the difficulties I created(!), that my parents operated in the moral universe of Creation as God made it to be, I am truly blessed and thankful. In their governance of me, they were establishing God as the source of justice, of concern for the oppressed and poor, whose moral purity, love and mercy, as a great and beautiful thing. They weren’t perfect, but the God who made them my parents and made me certainly is! The Law is a document of holy love through and through.”

All of this relates to the individual’s life experience, but there is also a corporate significance to this bestowal of the Spirit and that relates to Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God: **The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel.** (Mark 1:14-15) Now the third and fourth clauses relate to the first and second clauses. The good news (fourth clause) is that now is now (first clause). **The time is fulfilled.** There is no more waiting in store for us. Now what? Now, **the kingdom of God is at hand**(second clause)! This is the gospel (fourth clause), the great news that Jesus came preaching.

That kingdom is present now in Jesus and it is present with Him as well. By faith in me, we enter the kingdom of God, the realm where all is Spirit-guided—where we live as grown-ups. This is life in the body of Christ, His church. More widely, or, programmatically, all power and authority is *being restored* to God’s hands as *Jesus preaches*; now God is making His power and presence known. He is taking back all that has been usurped through rebellion and sin! This divine initiative began with Jesus’ Word (as He preached and taught) issues in the new order of life that follows His crucifixion: this present age. What was sustained in that day, by the presence of Jesus will be effected in our age by the indwelling Spirit which Jesus promised to send to us:

15 “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper (Advocate, Counselor), to be with you forever, 17 even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be (is) in you. 18 “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. 19 Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. (John 14:15-19)

Paul will proceed to establish how sure, *how indelible* this blessing is. **To give a human example**, he says, or “to use metaphor from life as we live it,” Paul urges us to compare these promises of God as *indelible* as a ratified covenant, for instance like a “Last Will and Testament.” In centuries bygone, the testament was a final word *from the deceased to his posterity*, a written and notarized testimony to the power and activity of God in the deceased’s life—a word of faith, testimony, left for his survivors and read by the executor of the estate.

So, to review, a wall of separation has been broken down by the crucifixion (between those known as Jews and everyone else). Now, a way of salvation has

been opened for everyone—all may enter by faith into the blessings of Abraham (notably the gift of the Holy Spirit). *This is an enormous change in the way of doing business, spiritually speaking.* The blessing (redemption by faith) imparts to the spiritual power, a capacity for holiness, establishes our standing as sons, and as heirs—all this as the divine nature forms within us (approximating what was once restricted to Christ's own person).

Application. Please note. I have intentionally not said one word about the election (until now) and I have not focused on the fearful and difficult times we are apparently in. This is why I did so. Because it is vital to live our lives according to what matters ultimately—which is to say, we are to live by faith. We know that as important as politics is, there are much weightier concerns. The salvation of lost souls is still more important than who occupies the Oval Office. What God is up to, what He wants us engaged in and motivated by (His work, His glory, His will **on earth as it is in heaven**) has persisted in spite of presidents, and kings. We are to seek justice (for many plainly have the wrong end of the justice stick), we are to love and serve . . . not to fear and flee. It is possible that we may die in the process of serving our great King. That is life; everyone dies. What we believe, however, is that how people live matters more than sheer biological longevity! Living near and for this world is exactly what the enemy of our souls wants—because those who do come up empty. But those who live near and for the Lord shall not go unrewarded. The rewards that last cannot be stored up on earth! Therefore we choose to live as those willing to lose it all to gain it all. We will live courageously as those certain of eternal life because Christ has set us free from sin, death, bondage to Satan and the grave.

Amen