

**The Lessons Appointed for  
Use on the  
First Sunday after Christmas**



**All Years**

**RCL**

Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7

John 1:1-18

Psalm 147:1-12

**The Collect**

Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

*AMEN*

Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7

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.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

**John 1:1-18**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept

him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

## SERMON

I'd bet that everyone in this room grew up being taught, as I was, that the purpose of life is to separate the good guys from the bad guys. Only the good guys "go to heaven", so the "good news" is that IF we are law-abiding we'll be rewarded. Frankly, that doesn't sound like good news to me. What if we treated our children that way? IF you do exactly what I say, you are loved, and IF you don't, you are cast out of the family. That's one way to understand the relationship between us and our creator, I suppose, but might there be another way? There is and John expresses it this way:

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

It was the birth, life and death of Jesus, called the Christ, the gift of God, which brought to the world a light, the very Spirit of God, which enlightens everyone, and moreover,

... to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

Those who receive the light are granted the power to become children of God, and if children, then heirs. Their lives will be governed by that light rather than by the demands of the Law. That's quite a switch, and, as we will see, it was at the center of a serious dispute between Paul and certain Missionaries to his churches in Galatia. It's quite a tale but to understand it, we need to be clear on one thing: Paul is speaking of Torah observance, but his argument can be extended, if we do so carefully, to any codified system of behavior. Law is es-

sential, but of more value is love of neighbor.

When we read from Galatians, we are reading an authentic letter from the hand of Paul, a letter of correction to the churches he founded in what is now Turkey. Those he opposed in this letter are often called “Judaizers”, but that is a usage fraught with terrible peril, because it characterizes this group as wishing to convince the Christians in Galatia to return to Judaism. They wished nothing of the sort, and that mistake is the fountain head from which all manner of antisemitism has sprung via proof-texting passages from Galatians to say things Paul would have been horrified to hear. To avoid that mistake and to allow us not to be distracted from what I want to share with you, I prefer the term “Missionaries” for they were, in fact, Jewish Christians seeking to spread their understanding of the Gospel, one which required Torah observance. Make no mistake –

the issues leading to the writing of this letter were dead-ly serious. Paul wrote:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! 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? Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? Did you experience so much for nothing?—if it really was for nothing. Well then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?

Paul is raising a critical question: do we receive the Spirit by a personal action, that is, by choosing to do the works of the law, or do we act in accord with the Spirit granted to us by Christ's selfless act upon the cross? You can see how important the issue was. If, as those who opposed him insisted, you can enter into a proper



relation with God by a personal act of will to obey the demands of Torah Law, then of what purpose was Jesus' death upon the cross? If we can do it ourselves, why did Christ have to die? This is not just an historical debate between theologians long ago. For Paul, life is about receipt of the Spirit and living in a right relationship with God, and he is adamant that this cannot be accomplished by human effort, but only by receipt of God's gift of faith.

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.

The Law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. "Faith" apparently isn't something one acquires by an act of will, accord-

ing to Paul. Paul says that faith came through Christ allowing us to be justified by that gift of faith.

I want to be clear here. Paul is not saying that a Christian is free to live a lawless life. Rather, he is saying that Christ's selfless act upon the Cross grants to us power to be children of God and that it is that gift of the Spirit through Christ which will govern our lives. It's not in our text for today, but recall the Parable of the Good Samaritan. A man is beaten and left for dead. A priest and a Levite pass him by on the other side for the Law prohibits them from touching a corpse. Adherence to the Law, therefore, gives them an opportunity to refuse to bother themselves with him. The Samaritan, on the other hand, acts from indwelling compassion. See the difference? Law looks to behavior. The Gospel speaks of a change of attitude toward God, toward Creation, toward our brother and sisters – what Paul calls

“receiving the Spirit” – something which cannot be managed by human will. It must be given to us by God.

Those who came to the churches of Galatia with a message that Torah observance was required of all were teaching, in effect, that our salvation is up to us, that we can, by an act of our will, decide to be the good guys. Paul is infuriated by this line of thought for it makes a mockery of Christ’s death upon the cross.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

With the Spirit of the Son in our hearts crying “Abba! Father!” we have no further need for a disciplinarian. Heeding the cry of the Spirit will lead us into that prop-

er relationship with God which is the foundation of life.

Now we can revisit what I said earlier about any codified system of law. I saw on the news that there is a mother, an illegal alien, now living in a Quaker church to avoid deportation. To be deported would separate her from her family, her children being citizens. The law, Federal law in this case rather than Torah, says that a country without borders is not a country, and that the law must be enforced because it is the law, and enforced without deference to the harm potentially caused. That is the position of the Missionaries Paul is opposing. The Spirit granted us by Christ's sacrificial death pulls our hearts in a completely different direction, and so the church gives her sanctuary.

We turn away those who flee from the terrible violence in Syria, telling ourselves that we must protect ourselves from those who might do us harm, and any-

way we cannot see the bodies of children in the streets from here. In 1939, we felt the same way about German Jews and turned aside MS St. Louis with over 900 Jewish refugees onboard, sentencing them to death in the camps. We couldn't see the ovens from here, either. Being law observant allows us to feel righteous by strictly following the law, irrespective of the harm that results. Would we be so quick to construct good reasons to do bad things if we were forced to live in awareness of the consequences of our self-righteousness? I suspect not. We can construct good reasons to do bad things only by keeping ourselves unaware of the harm we do. The Spirit of the Son granted us makes us always aware of the consequences of our actions.

Heed the voice of the Spirit, church. Act upon the faith that has been given you.

AMEN

## BENEDICTION

If the purpose of life is to reveal who are the good guys and who are the bad guys, measured against the standard of the law, then the priest and the Levite who left the injured man to die are the good guys, the Samaritan who saved him is the bad guy, and Christ's sacrificial death is inspiring but otherwise unremarkable. I don't believe that. I believe that through Christ, we are given the power to be children of God, and if children, then heirs. There was one of those Internet things that went around a few years ago – WWJD It stands for "What Would Jesus Do"? Allow that thought to be front of mind in all you do. Act from the gift of the spirit, measuring your activities against Jesus' teaching. Do so, church.

The Lord bless you and keep you;  
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;  
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

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*Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.*

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