

## **The Ministry of Christ is the Ministry of Love**

**Galatians 5: 1 – 6**

**June 26, 2022**

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At the 240th session of the Virginia Annual Conference, the clergy and laity gathered again in person for the first time in three years. 2019 was our last in-person annual conference, and while many did wear masks and felt more comfortable sitting in an isolated area, most people felt secure enough to go without a mask as we were not crowded. But whether people wore masks or mask-less, everyone seemed genuinely glad to see each other.

Some of you may be wondering; what is a United Methodist Annual Conference like or what is it all about? Well, I am here to tell you that it is a gathering of flawed people seeking the blessing and guidance of a loving and living God, not only for who we are and who we are becoming but also for where we are on this spiritual journey and where we are going.

Every year I make a fuss about going to the Annual Conference, as I get lost or distracted in the business or the busyness of it all. I always seem to go dreading the whole ordeal and as soon as I see one or two friends, especially classmates from seminary, and we begin to catch up, it eases my tension as if it were a balm to heal my sin-sick soul. But this year was different. As I said, we had not gathered in three years, and as you all know, the last two and a half have been exceptionally challenging.

On the first morning, as we began our clergy session, I caught up with an old friend who I had not seen nor heard from in three years. She told me about her father having to move to a nursing home and her mother, suffering from Alzheimer's, who is now living with her, with only a sister who lives on the other side of the state, all while living through the pandemic. The help she had could no longer help. I could see her pain as she shared her story and also the relief she felt as she shared her story with me. That sense of connection meant so much.

Well, as for the conference itself, this year did not disappoint with some very intense discussions of people fiercely defending their theological positions on a

variety of matters. But while that may have been what I was expecting, I was pleasantly surprised to witness as I thought the conference could come to an abrupt and unintended end, a spirit of calm presence came over all as the Choir sang and prayers were said, and key members of the annual conference such as The Rev. Tom Berlin stood up to speak eloquent words of wisdom and calm to lead to a decision to be made that satisfied most of the contingency gathered.

And the only way we can live into that grace is by expressing our faith through love. What really began to stand out for me, was this sincere expression of faith through genuine love. Isn't it funny how we all tend to get caught up in the distractions of busy-ness or blaming or finger-pointing or just general orneriness, and we miss the real ministry of Christ in how we are called to love one another with at the very least a sense of mutual respect and a listening and caring ear?

We make a big deal about freedom in our nation, do we not? The fourth of July is coming up and most Americans will celebrate the notion of freedom that we believe we have in this nation, freedom, or rights, or whatever. But that is not the context in which Paul is discussing freedom. The freedom that Paul is talking about is the spiritual freedom that we have in the grace that frees us from the yoke of slavery to what? To the law.

Why does Paul stress this? Because no one can be justified by the law. Under the law of God, we are all sinners, and no one can escape this. If anyone thinks they do not sin or no longer sin, the scripture tells us that they are only fooling themselves. Focusing on trying to keep the laws of God is nothing more than a distraction to God's abundant grace. This does not mean that we are free to do whatever we want whenever we please, but it does mean that by grace if we confess our sin, we are freed from its heavy burden so that we may continue the journey towards sanctifying grace; to live in abundant grace.

And there is no sin that is any greater or any smaller than any other sin in the eyes of God. Let me say that another way. All sin is displeasing to God. But this is why God sent his only Son who is God who has come to us in human form to pay the penalty for our sins whether they are the ones that we think are monster sins or the little sins we think we can get away with like gossip or little lies that are meant to hurt or do harm, or when we discredit another behind their back. None

of those does God-like and they hurt God when we do them. Why? Because we do them to his creation.

But as Paul says, if we are going to believe in the freedom that God gives us through grace, then we must see one another in that light of grace as well. If we do not then we are not truly living in grace, we are still living under the law, and it is the law that brings judgment.

In the text of this passage, Paul addresses the Jewish law of males having to be circumcised in order to fulfill the law, otherwise, they were considered unclean. So the Greek-born Galatians who had accepted God's grace for themselves were being deceived by others who claimed to be Christians yet were telling them that to truly be saved they must follow the Law of Moses. They must be circumcised. That is not grace and that is not living in grace. That is living in slavery to the law, by which no one can be justified.

If we live by the law, Paul says, then Christ has no value; those who are trying to live by the law, even though they call themselves Christian have been alienated from Christ. Righteousness does not come to us from following the law. What the law does is point out our unrighteousness. And if we want to focus on it, it becomes a great distraction to living in grace.

Our true righteousness comes only by faith; faith that Christ did die for our sins and that is the only spirit of righteousness that we can have. Following the law or the letter of the law for the sake of the law has no value. It is merely a distraction.

The only thing that counts, Paul says, is faith expressing itself through love. This is the same love that Christ shared from the cross, who though he knew no sin, gave his life as a ransom for all of us, not just a few of us, or the better of us, not just the rich, or just the poor, or just the straight, the white or the black or anyone in between, but for all who would believe that Christ would love them enough to give his life for them. That is they would know that they are loved by God.

And when we come to know that we are loved by God, saved by God, carried by God, even though our sins are like scarlet, the death of Jesus has covered them and cleansed our hearts. The gift of grace to our lives is what we are now called to live under and in. We are called to share this grace through our faith, faith that

is expressed not through following the letter of the law but solely through sharing the gift of God's love, as we are called to express love for our neighbors. And we are called to grow in that grace

The ministry each of us is called to share in is the ministry of Christ, which is nothing less than the ministry of love being shared with those in need of love. Whether it is in the form of food, housing, clothing, or just human touch, or a friend to talk to or help to carry a burden or to help shed off the burden of guilt and shame, because they cannot get past the sin that causes it, this is all our ministry.