

"A Doctrine That Doesn't Like Walls"
Galatians 2:15-21
Luke 7:36-50

Doctrines and dogmas can be, and often are, the bane of Christian life. One reason is that they are more like fences designed to keep some people in and keep others out. It's not just our nation that struggles with immigration, the church has spent 2000 years in the role of gatekeeper, almost forgetting that it was Jesus who said, **"I am the gate for the sheep."**¹

A man once stood on the railing of a bridge ready to jump. A passerby called out to him:

Friend, don't jump. *I must. I am all alone. No one cares.*

Do you believe in God? *Yes, I do.* So do I!

Are you a Christian? *Yes!* So am I!

Catholic or Protestant? *Protestant.* So am I!

What denomination? *Lutheran.* So am I!

Which Synod? *Dakota.* Oh, friend, so am I!

North or South Dakota Synod? *North.* So am I!

Rite of 1876 or 1885? *Rite of 1885.* So am I!

German speaking or Scandinavian? *German.* So am I!

Hussite or Muellerite? *Muellerite.* So am I!

Brother, God has sent me to save you. You are not alone. Take my hand.

(Reaches toward the jumper)

Are you a follower of Jacob Mueller or Franz Mueller?

Jacob Mueller. What? *Jacob Mueller!*

(The rescuer gives him a push.)

Jump, you heretic!

See what I mean. It gets almost that bad at times when we try to define the boundaries of the church and then have the audacity to believe that the boundaries of the church determine the boundaries of God's love. I'm reminded of the little girl who was one asked who the pagans are. Her answer, "Pagans are people who don't argue about religion."² Personally, I'm closer to Robert Frost's poem, "something there is that doesn't love a wall!"

Justification by faith is the doctrine we meet today. It is anything but exclusionary! It created a revolution in the life of Martin Luther and it began the reformation of the church in the 16th century.

"For it is by God's grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God's gift, so that no one can boast about it."³

It was important for Luther and continues to be important because it address those who are burdened by their guilt and eternally frustrated in their efforts to make themselves acceptable to God. For the apostle Paul, the particular concern was for the Gentiles. His calling was to preach Christ in a pluralistic and divided world.

The letter of Galatians speaks to the issue of those who wanted to use religion to fence out some people from Christianity. Gentiles would first be required to become Jews. Not so, says Paul. The essence of the Gospel is that God loves us not because of who we are but because of who God is.

We are not justified or made righteous or acceptable to God because we have done or believed the right things. We are justified by Christ's death and resurrection.

For Paul, it's a black or white issue. Either we are deserving of God's love or we are not. If we think we are, then we've missed the point of the Gospel. Indeed, **"if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing."**

Just how that doctrine plays out becomes obvious in the story from Luke's gospel. One day Jesus was invited for dinner at the home of Simon the Pharisee. While there, a woman from the city, who was a sinner, came in and with her jar of ointment and extended to Jesus the normal hospitality Simon either ignored or forgot: foot washing, anointing, and a kiss.

It's often assumed that the woman was a prostitute, though at least one commentator writes that "to speak of her as a prostitute is to engage in useless speculation." Maybe so, but read between the lines and come to your own conclusions. In any event, she was of a "different kind" than Simon and very clearly out of place.

It's evident that she had heard of Jesus before, maybe she heard him preach or felt the touch of his grace. When she learned that Jesus was at Simon's house, she comes prepared for her act of devotion.

Even though Simon was uncomfortable with her presence, she was not uncomfortable in the home of a Pharisee to express her devotion to Jesus. She risked being humiliated by such a proper group of people. I wonder what Jesus said or did for her that made her take such a risk?

Perhaps she had an experience similar to what Mary Ann Bird writes about in *The Whisper Test*.

I grew up knowing I was different, and I hated it. I was born with a cleft palate, and when I started school, my classmates made it clear to me how I looked to others: a little girl with a misshapen lip, crooked nose, lopsided teeth, and garbled speech.

When schoolmates asked, "What happened to your lip?" I'd tell them I'd fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable to have suffered an accident than to have been born different. I was convinced that no one outside my family could love me.

There was, however, a teacher in the second grade whom we all adored--Mrs. Leonard by name. She was short, round, happy--a sparkling lady.

Annually we had a hearing test ... Mrs. Leonard gave the test to everyone in the class, and finally it was my turn. I knew from past years that as we stood against the door and covered one ear, the teacher sitting at her desk would whisper something, and we would have to repeat it back--things like "The sky is blue" or "Do you have new shoes?" I waited there for those words that God must have put into her mouth, those seven words that changed my life. Mrs. Leonard said, in her whisper, "I wish you were my little girl."⁴

Could the woman, from the city, who was a sinner, of whatever ilk, have heard Jesus whisper into her ear sometime earlier, "Remember, you are God's daughter?" Of course, that, too, is only

speculation, but I hope it's not useless. It must have been something like that. What else could have transformed her life? To hear and believe that you are accepted and loved, not because you are perfect, but because you are you, that is justification by faith. That acceptance enables us to accept ourselves and to love others, knowing that no one has any ground on which to stand except God's grace.⁵

Jesus reacts to Simon's disdain by telling a parable with an obvious conclusion. The one who has the greater debt forgiven will love more. The outpouring of the woman's devotion is proof that she knew just how great her forgiveness was.

I don't think Jesus wants to suggest that her sin was greater than Simon's sin. I don't think God differentiates between misdemeanors and felonies. I think the parable means that she had a greater sense of forgiveness. Whether she was a prostitute or not, Simon's sin was just as demeaning of human life. As religious people, our sin tends to be of thinking we have no sin.⁶ Or, as someone has said, "To get a group of bad people to do evil things is easy; to get a group of good people to do evil things requires religion."

Fred Craddock, who is a most gifted scholar and preacher, raises a haunting issue in his commentary on Luke.

The word of Jesus "Go in peace" adds considerable pathos to the event. Where does one go when told by Christ "Go in peace"? The price of the woman's way of life in the city has been removal from the very institutions that carried the resources to restore her. The one place where she is welcome is the street, among people like herself. What she needs is a community of forgiven and forgiving sinners. The story screams the need for a church, not just any church but one that says, "You are welcome here."⁷

The church these days continually laments its shrinking membership. I wonder if one of the reasons is that we keep talking to people who don't feel that great a need for God's forgiving love, that is, people pretty much like ourselves, rather than talking to those who do feel the need. Maybe it's because we insist that they become like us first, rather than coming as they are and allowing Christ to transform them into everything God wants them to become.

Broad Street Ministry is sponsored by several Presbyterian congregations in the city of Philadelphia and meets across the street from the Kimmel Center in an old church building of a Presbyterian congregation that has since died. It's mission is to reach out with Christ's love to the ever growing population of artistic young people who live and move and have their being along that section of Broad Street also known as the Avenue of the Arts. That is, it seeks to reach out to those who would not likely brighten the door of your average Presbyterian congregation.

It's web-site reads: "Maybe you are new to the city and are looking for a greater sense of community. Maybe you are tired of being evaluated by others based on your bank statement or your fashion sense. Maybe you have been looking for a place to explore the hard questions of meaning and faith – and not be judged! If you are the kind of person who wouldn't ordinarily think of yourself as spending a lot of time at church – this may be the kind of place for you! ... Worship services are a place where all of life experiences are brought before God ... [where] questions are honored and dogmatic certainty is understood as an impediment to authentic relationship with God. It is a place where mystery is embraced but the intellect is not sacrificed."⁸

The reason for referring to Broad Street Ministry this morning is because this past week I received an e-mail from them promoting a “**No Barriers Dinner**” this Wednesday at 6:00 p.m. A no barriers dinner! That set me to wondering what barriers we erect to keep people from coming to Jesus because they don't live up to our standards? I was in a store recently and saw two men whom I suspect were gay. I wonder. If they came to First Presbyterian Church to give devotion to Jesus, would they find a welcome? What about the kids who roam the malls on Friday and Saturday evenings? If they should come to First Presbyterian, would they find a welcome? What if a bag lady walked her shopping cart, filled with all her worldly belongs, and parked it outside so she could come in a worship with us. Would she find a welcome, or would we keep her at arms' length?

Studies have shown how our society is prejudiced against those who are not handsome or beautiful. What about the people who aren't pretty? Since beauty is in the eye of the beholder, who's definition of beauty will we use? What about any one who is disenfranchised from full participation in the life of society? If they should come to First Presbyterian to give devotion to Jesus, would they find a welcome? Or, would it be kinder for Jesus to say to them, "Go in peace, go back to the street"?

I know, it's not likely that such folk would want to give devotion to Jesus, not here anyway. But how do we know what he might have whispered to them along life's way. May God help us to embrace an old doctrine so we can learn that if God can accept us, God can accept others. Justification by faith is at least one doctrine that does not like walls.

1. John 10:7
2. Anthony DeMello, *The Song of the Bird*, (Garden City: Image Books, 1982) p. 149
3. Ephesians 2:8-9, Good News Bible
4. quoted in Leadership, Winter, 1995, p. 39.
5. See Confession of 1967, Book of Confessions, 9.22
6. Book of Confessions, 9.13
7. Interpretation Commentary on Luke, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), p. 106
8. www.broadstreetministry.org