

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Rooted and Grounded in Love: No Barrier Community”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Galatians 1:1-9
Deuteronomy 27:1-8

The soccer ball was flying through the air. The guy next to me lifted up his fist and knocked the ball down the field. “Hand ball,” I exclaimed, “It’s our ball.” “No, it’s not,” he replied. “Sure is, you hit it with your hand.” “No I didn’t. I hit it with my fist. That’s legal.” OK so I was playing soccer in high school gym class with a group of guys who evidently had never played the game, but rules are rules. “No,” I came back, “the rules are that you cannot hit the ball with any part of your arm or hand (trying not to get too technical). If you do it’s a hand ball and the other team gets it.” By this time we had gathered a crowd of teammates around us and the debate began. His team insisted that he was right. Mine didn’t really care. It was soon obvious who was going to get to make the rules...and it wasn’t me and it wasn’t the governing body of soccer at any level. The new rule was you could hit the ball with your fist. To this day I still shudder when I think of all of those guys walking away thinking that is how you play soccer.

It’s an amazing thing isn’t it, watching who thinks that they get to make the rules? Most of us have watched this unfold as of late when a clerk in Kentucky has decided that she, not the state of Kentucky which compels her to issue marriage licenses, and certainly not the Supreme Court which has issued an order to do the same, gets to make the rules. And we read about it this morning in our text in Galatians. For this is what these opening words are about. They are about who gets to make the rules for entry into the Jesus community. I was thinking about how to explain this and decided the best opening analogy would be a boxing match. So here goes...and I have always wanted to do this.

In the near corner, in the red trunks, is Saul of Tarsus, who we know as the Apostle Paul. He claims his power to make decisions comes directly from Jesus. As he writes, Paul an Apostle-sent neither by human commission not from human authorities but through Jesus Christ and God the Father...” He is fighting for a barrier free community in which there are no hurdles to membership. In the far corner, in the blue trunks, are the Circumcisers. They claim that their power is from God through the Torah; the Law of Moses. They claim a thousand years of tradition and the fact that Jesus was a good Jew to make their point; and that point is that in order to gain entry into the Jesus’ community you have to, if you are a male, be circumcised, just as had every member of God’s family since Abraham. So now let’s get ready to rumble.

And that is exactly what is going on. Paul began the fight by teaching the Galatians that they could be part of the Jesus’ community simply by a willingness to follow Jesus. This was

countered by the Circumcisers who jabbed that, no you had to be circumcised in order to be part of the Jesus' community. Paul then countered that with, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one, meaning Paul, who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel...not that there is another Gospel." It was a heavy weight theological battle.

For many of us here this morning I would guess this would already seem a bit, well unimportant. After all what does it matter who wins? What does it matter whether Paul or the Circumcisers win? This is an argument from a time long, long ago in a land far, far away. Yet what I want to tell you is that it does matter to all of us who are here this morning because how one comes into a community sets the stage for the kind of community into which one is coming. Let me explain. The college I attended had local and not national fraternities. And each fraternity decided on the pledging process, the process for entering into their community. One fraternity, to which a roommate of mine pledged, had a pledging process that eventually got them disbanded. Their process was filled not simply with fun things to do, but things bordering on cruel. And in some ways that carried through to the kind of community they became. There was another fraternity on campus that had no pledging process at all. You wanted to join? You were in. You were part of the group. They decided that they would be the un-fraternity. And their interior life was one of service, fun and joy. In the same way then it matters how the church decided this fight over who gets to make the rules between Paul and the Judaizers because it would, in the end determine what the Jesus' community looked like.

This is something that Paul understood as well. He understood that if he gets to set the rules then the community will be a barrier free community based on grace and freedom. If his opponents win, it will a restrictive community based on law. And for Paul, Jesus is about grace and not law. Paul knew that Jesus' ministry was all about grace. Paul knew that Jesus invited all persons to come and follow...and did it in a barrier free manner. It didn't matter if you were rich or poor, Jew, Roman or Samaritan, healthy or sick, powerful or oppressed, a man or woman, were afflicted with any physical limitations, Jesus opened his arms wide and invited you into his new Kingdom community. He was in some ways the good southern Galilean, who said, "Ya'll come." He never told people that they had to go through any kind of a religious ritual to be a follower. All they had to do was follow him and his example to the best of their abilities. His was a barrier free community, open to all

The second reason Paul chose a barrier free entry was freedom. He writes, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord, Jesus Christ who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age..." Let me explain. When people made the choice to follow Jesus, something happened to them. They were changed. They were made new. They had the power to resist sin; to resist the powers in this world that distort the goodness of ourselves as God creatures and goodness of God's creation. They had the power to live new lives. They had the power to love God and neighbor. And all of this came about without them having to be circumcised or to go through some elaborate religious ritual. This was then the experience of the reality of the no-barrier entry into the Jesus' community. What Paul wanted the Galatians to

remember is that they were already in, and had already received the benefits of being in the community of Jesus, long before his opponents showed up and tried to erect barriers to entry.

In the end we have no idea what the final outcome of the fight in Galatia was; whether or not they chose to become a barrier free community. But what it reminds us of is the fact that every Jesus' community, every church has to make the decision as to what kind of community it wants to become. Does it want to be a barrier free community or one in which there are extensive rules and regulations. And we see this struggle in the Roman church, where the Pope is trying to make the church more barrier free and he is facing push back from Bishops, priests and lay people who have no desire to bring down some of the barriers. We see it in our own denomination where hundreds of churches have left since the denomination has become fully inclusive of all persons. But we here at Frist Presbyterian have made the conscious decision that we will be a no-barrier community. As our inclusion statement puts it...

“As Everybody’s Church, we strive to be a faithful, open and inclusive community. We welcome the participation of all people of any ability, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or any other life circumstance.”

We are a no-barrier community not because it is fashionable but because it is Biblical; because it is at the heart of Paul’s message of grace and freedom. But we only become that if we live it. My challenge to you all this morning then is this, to ask yourselves, “How am I helping to make Everybody’s Church a no barrier community in which all persons are welcomed and are helped to realize that they are beloved children of God?”