

The Problem of A Past
June 6, 2010 • 2d S. After Pentecost
Text: Galatians 1:24: "And they glorified God because of me."
The Rev. Mark Eddington

LET ME BEGIN WITH THE OBVIOUS: I am not Devin McLachlan. This morning the rector is a guest of Saint John's in Newtonville, where I serve in an interim capacity, and at his invitation I am standing here. In the language of clerics, we are committing a little bit of mischief known as a "pulpit swap."

There is a reason why clergy folks love pulpit swaps, and because you look like the sort of trustworthy folk who can keep a secret I'll tell you what it is. It's because we all know that the principal result of this sort of effort is that *both* congregations will come out of the experience with a fresh reminder of what it is they really prefer about their own priest. A close runner-up is that old bit of wisdom your mother taught you about why from time to time she would have company come to the house for Sunday dinner. It's because everyone in the family behaves better when visitors are present.

So I am here, and he is there, and somehow by the grace of God we will all be the better for it.

One of the differences between us that you will probably take note of is that I live a little farther down toward the Protestant end of the spectrum that is the Anglican tradition. So please know I am doing my best to meet the high liturgical standards of the Parish of the Messiah, and I simply am going to trust that someone will give me a swift and discreet kick if I mess up something.

But another part of that difference is that I am a very old-fashioned text-and-title preacher, a dangerous tendency warned against by no less a significant body of theologians than Monty Python in their old sketch about “The Bishop.” The bishop and his entourage rush into the back of the church just as the preacher is mounting the pulpit—in a black Geneva gown; the preacher begins to announce his text in the traditional way (“I take as my text...”); the bishop warns him against it; and the pulpit explodes on one of those wonderfully excessive examples of Pythonesque pyrotechnics.

Well, the title for this sermon, which I fastened on almost immediately after Devin and I made this arrangement a little more than a month ago, is “The Problem of a Past.” And I take as my text that gentle example of Paul’s deep modesty from the twenty-fourth verse of the first chapter of the Epistle to the Galatians: “And they glorified God because of me.”



Most of you, probably all of you, remember some of the unique characteristics of the Epistle to the Galatians. It’s still worthwhile to remind ourselves of some of these points, if only because we’re going to be walking through this Epistle over the next five weeks on Sunday morning when it comes time for the second reading. Galatians has rightly been called the “Magna Charta of Christian liberty,” and it is indeed a text in which Paul sets out in a powerful way his case for how the death and resurrection of Christ have freed us from life under the law and placed us in a new realm ruled by the law of love.

All well and good. But Galatians doesn’t start out sounding like a document about love. It sounds out starting something like a termination notice. Paul dispenses with the usual long flowering greeting typical of formal correspondence in Roman times and by the sixth verse is already shaking his fist at his recipients.

We didn't hear that bit this morning because the editors of the lectionary perhaps didn't want to confuse or trouble us—but here's what Paul opens with: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel." Yikes. "The one" he is speaking about here, by the way, is none other than himself—he is accusing the Galatian church of abandoning him and what he had taught them, full stop. He's hurt, and he's not afraid to say it plainly.

But then Paul takes a sort of interesting rhetorical turn. Instead of continuing down the road of piling on his complaints about them—he's going to get to that later—he instead begins by trying to establish his *bona fides* as an apostle and bearer of the gospel. And the way he manages this is truly masterful, because the path that he pursues is one that will give the Galatians the means they need to set things back to rights.

Here's what Paul does. He reminds them of his own troubled and slightly shady past. He pulls no punches in characterizing the man he was. He was outside the Christian community, not just as one of its critics, but as a man who persecuted the church and its members—here's his word—violently. He wasn't just trying to stop the church from growing; he was trying to destroy it. He wasn't just energetic in his defense of the covenant between he Jewish people and God; he was zealous in his claim to righteousness. After all, zealots always are.

So Paul has a past, and not necessarily a good past. He doesn't really have the kind of c.v. that would get you into the ordination process. We know from all we have from him that some things about Paul never changed—he seems always to have remained pretty zealous in his defense of what he believed. But pretty much everything else about Paul of Tarsus changed, and changed dramatically.

The problem is, there's a considerable lag between a change in our hearts and a change in our reputation. It may be that Jesus works on at least some people in a very individual way. I've never had a blinding flash on my road to Damascus, I never had a conversation with Christ on a train ride to Darjeeling the way Mother Teresa did. I seem to be one of those folks who gets brought to salvation more through engagement with the Christian community than through any sort of theophany. And I might go so far as to say that's true for most of us.

But no matter how the message of the Gospel comes to us, the fact is we live it out in community. And in our communities, our reputations not only precede us; very often they follow behind us like a heavy train. Reputations are easy to gain, but difficult to change, and nearly impossible to shed.

Paul's problem is the problem of a past—*his* past. You almost get the sense from the intensity of his emotion in this epistle that he senses the Galatians are wandering away from his teaching because he is still carrying around that somewhat iffy reputation. And so he makes out his case, with this bald-faced boast at the end: "They glorified God because of me." Don't trust the rumors, he is saying—look at the fruits.



I have spent this past week back home in Michigan on a kind of working vacation, tending to my mother's house and preaching the retirement of one of my oldest and dearest friends in the ministry.

Something sort of interesting happened in Michigan this past week that touches on this question of reputation, and the way it can be burnished or broken in the harsh light of public notice. There was a moment on Thursday of last week when I think Michigan must have been the only place on the planet where the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico was actually pushed off the front pages for at least one news cycle.

The story concerns one of the most theologically rich preaching sources in the public eye today. I am speaking, of course, of Major League Baseball. You may know the story to which I allude. It concerns a twenty-eight-year-old right-handed Detroit Tigers pitcher from Venezuela named Armando Galarraga, and a fifty-five year old Major League umpire from Toledo named Jim Joyce.

To cut a very long story down to its elements, Mr. Galarraga was within a single out of one of the rarest feats in all of baseball—pitching a perfect game. And Mr. Joyce just happened to be the guy who blew a call at first base that incorrectly ended that chance.

But for our purposes, that's not really the story. The story is about what happened *next*.

First. Mr. Joyce, after hearing a fairly zealous critique by the Tigers' manager, went directly to the umpire's room in the stadium and asked to see a replay of his own disputed call.

The next day he went directly to Mr. Galarraga in the ballpark, pulled him aside, and told him that he had absolutely and without question made a mistake—a mistake that was no minor thing in this context, but a kind of career-maker for Mr. Galarraga.

Not only this: Mr. Joyce then gave a press conference in numerous interviews in which he said the same thing again and again: He had simply blown the call. No mediating circumstances, no offers of excuses: He got it wrong, period.

Mr. Joyce said something else that was particularly interesting. Everyone pretty much knew what the Tigers' manager had said to him after the game, because, well, you could have read his lips with your eyes closed. But then one of the reporters asked him what Mr. Galarraga had said to him in the heat of the moment.

“Nothing,” came the reply. “He didn’t say a word to me. Not a single word.”

In fact, if you look carefully at the reply, Galarraga is seen for just a brief moment reacting to the call. He looks up toward the sky, he shrugs—and *he smiles*.

Mr. Galarraga did have something to say the next day, as you might expect. As I said, Mr. Joyce came directly to him to speak his apology. And then Mr. Galarraga replied. Do you know what he said? “Nobody’s perfect. We all make mistakes. Thanks for coming to me.”

And even that is not the end of the story. Later that day, just before the next game started, out of the Tigers dugout came Mr. Galarraga carrying the lineup card for this team that night to give to the home-plate umpire. Wouldn’t you just know that the guy who walked out of the tunnel to take his place behind home plate was Jim Joyce. And as the two shook hands, the entire crowd, in their tens of thousands, erupted—not in boos, but in cheers.

Anybody at Saint John’s will tell you that I plan my sermons weeks in advance, and I almost never make reference in the pulpit to something from the headlines. But I see this as a kind timeless story, a little drama with some deep themes to it that connect with our work this morning.

First, just think about this. In the split second before that baseball settled in the first-baseman’s glove in the unblinking eye of the television camera, everyone who knows anything about baseball would have told you that Mr. Joyce, the umpire, was the man with considerable power over Mr. Galarraga’s reputation.

It turned out to be just the reverse. It turned out that Mr. Galarraga was a man put into a position of great power over Mr. Joyce’s reputation. And in that moment what he did with that power was an act of clear and unquestionable grace.

But even more to the point, when Jim Joyce and Armando Galarraga got up the next morning they both were very suddenly men with a past—a very highly charged past. But that past could not be condensed to that single split-second at first base.

Because even though practically everyone in the media was amazed and surprised—and maybe even outraged—at the ability of Mr. Joyce to make a completely clean breast of his mistake, and the grace of Mr. Galarraga of forgiving him without fuss or fanfare, no one who knows either of those two men has been in the least surprised at how they acted.



When Paul begins his letter to the Galatians by reminding them of his own troubled reputation, his own capacity for mistakes and misjudgments, he is effectively making it plain to them that their own mistakes will not stand in the way of the work God is going to accomplish in them and through them.

And when Paul points out to them that despite all his past there have been those who have glorified God because of his work, he may be boasting—at least a little—but more importantly he is remind them that God works through broken vessels and imperfect reputations to achieve the greatest accomplishments in building up the kingdom.

Now, I cannot just end this message here before I bring this theme home to us, dear friends. Because we have a past, too; we do at Saint John's, and you do, too. And some of that past—some might say, some of the least glorious of any of it—is a past that we shared together.

And it is just possible we got something of a reputation out of that experience—at least a reputation in each other’s eyes, and just maybe in the eyes of those around us too. Maybe we have a reputation for being small, or barely sustainable, or too determined to do things our own way to do anything together. Or maybe we have created reputations in our own eyes—maybe we simply can’t imagine that we could ever be anything different from what we now are.

I leave you with the reminder that it is just such broken vessels, just such troubled reputations, that God chooses to work through in changing the world. The question is not whether we *can* do it, because in Pentecost we remember that the Holy Spirit has already provided us with every gift, every skill, every capability we could possibly need to do that work. The question is whether we *will* do whatever it is God is asking us, inviting us, insisting on us to do—or whether instead *we* will insist on doing our own things and tending to our own worries. Paul and the Galatians, Mr. Joyce and Mr. Galarraga, we and you—in each of these partnerships reside the problem of a past but also a means of grace and a hope of glory. For that, thanks be to God. *Amen.*