

Grace to you and peace from our risen Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

For the last several weeks, our readings have been from the book of Acts – which is a series of screenshots of the history of the early church. How it developed, the people who were part of it, and the struggles they had as people from varying backgrounds came together as believers in Jesus to form one community.

Forming that community wasn't an easy process: they argued about which rules to follow – or not. People died. There was prejudice and racism and economic inequality. But they kept coming together, and worked together, to figure things out.

One of the most important decisions they made was that people who believed in Jesus, but hadn't been raised as Jewish, didn't have to convert to Judaism and follow those laws and practices in order to be fully Christian and part of God's family.

And the church moved forward and continued to grow, seemingly exponentially.

Even its strongest persecutor, Saul – who we know as the apostle Paul, was called by God to become part of this movement. After his conversion, Paul went from being a zealous Pharisee to a zealous evangelizer in the name of Jesus. There was no middle ground for him – he was all in.

And he was called primarily to go into Gentile territories, to take the good news of Jesus to people who hadn't been raised as Jewish. So, they are the target audience of Paul's letters. He wrote them in response to what was going on in those specific Christian communities. Which is why each one has a different theme.

In the case of the letter to the Galatians, Paul had already been to the Christian community there. He had taught them about Jesus – that what Jesus had done was enough. All they had to do was trust that, and live their lives loving God and their neighbor. And they were good with that.

What this letter is about is that after Paul left, some missionaries who were more conservative arrived in Galatia and began to undermine his work there. These missionaries observed Torah – Jewish law – and told the Christians in Galatia that they needed to do the same.

And the Christians in Galatia started following those teachings, even though it had already been decided years earlier, and affirmed by Paul, that they didn't need to. And Paul was really upset about it.

And what he writes in this letter is foundational Christian theology and understanding – even for us today. This letter is where Martin Luther's theology originates.

¹In this letter, Paul reiterates that justification – being made right with God – comes through trusting Christ's love. Not through keeping the law. This trust, this faith, means more than intellectually believing something to be true.

When Paul talks about the faith that believers have, he means the trust they have in Jesus for their relationship with God. And that they live their lives in ways that are consistent with that relationship of trust.

What he's getting at is the way people's lives are oriented, or positioned. Because faith involves both trusting Jesus gives us a right relationship with God, and a commitment to live in a way that reflects that we are in that relationship with God.

And trusting that that is enough.

Many of us grew up with our lives being shaped by this understanding. But 2000+ years ago, it was a brand new way of being. And it's as difficult to live into now as it was when it first became part of the church's understanding of Jesus.

Because the world around us is structured in such a way that we're made to feel like we have to earn everything – including our value to just exist. And we're made to feel like we're never good enough – or never enough.

But in Jesus, we are enough. Jesus loved us enough to save us as we are. We receive that gift with the commitment to live in response to it. Not because we have to live in a certain way so that it doesn't get taken away from us – it's a done deal.

But we live in response to the gift of Jesus' love because of Jesus' love. Because of what it has done for us and for the way it shapes our lives. Because Jesus' love makes us "enough."

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/living-by-faith/commentary-on-galatians-113-17-211-21-5>

The theologian Joseph Sittler told the story of a time when he was in Jerusalem and needed some work done on his car because it wouldn't start. So, he got it to a mechanic and left it there for the work to be done.

A few days later, it was ready. And when Sittler picked it up, the mechanic handed him the keys and said, "Tzadik." In that context, Tzadik means, "it works."

But in the Hebrew language, Tzadik also means "righteousness" – as in, being made right with God. Being in right relationship with God.

Through Jesus, in Jesus, because of Jesus, our relationship with God works. That is, Jesus puts us in right relationship with God. No amount of rule-following on our part can ever accomplish that. That's what Paul needed the Christians in Galatia to understand not just with their heads but with their hearts.

And that isn't always the easiest thing to do. Because it means living a life of trust. That's what faith is – trust. The opposite of faith is certainty. And wanting that certainty is what so often gets hold of us and takes over.

Feeling like we have to prove ourselves, our worth. Feeling like we have to follow a set of rules that we don't need to. Feeling like if we do just a little more, then we'll be good with God. And getting caught up in that fear and losing our spiritual footing, in a manner of speaking.

It happens to faith communities, congregations, as easily as it does to individual people.

But in a faith community, like ours, when we engage with one another, when we encourage each other and nurture each other's faith, we live understanding that our faith in God – our trust in God, in Jesus' love – is our foundation.

And when we remember that, we discover that this trust, this relationship, is what keeps us grounded. That it keeps us from listening to the things that lure us away from God, and holds us in God's love, and shapes our lives according to that love.

And we remember, too, that when our priorities get skewed and try to pull us toward a different foundation, because we're constantly being pulled away from God's foundation, our trust in our relationship with God shows us the way back.

Living a life of trust like this is incredibly hard in a world like ours that is set up to make demands on us.

Ultimately, these demands, this way of living, tells us that God's love isn't a gift and that we somehow have to earn it. When really, all we have to do is trust it.

Putting our trust in God and God's love for us is foundational to who we are as God's people. Trusting anyone else or anything else pulls us away from that.

But when we live this life of trust, it keeps us grounded in the knowledge that in and through and because of Jesus, we don't have to earn God's love. We are already right with God because God loves us and values us as we are.

This life of trust isn't a life of certainty. But it is the life that brings life and love to us and to the world.

Alleluia and thanks be to God! Amen.