

“Set Free to Be”

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First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson: Joshua 24:14-16

New Testament Lesson: Galatians 6:11-18

Last night, we had the first of our Family Movie Nights, *with* a sermon tie in on Sunday. Welcome to the sermon tie-in. And bear with me as I take a moment to talk about the movie, for those who didn't attend, before we tie it into what the Apostle Paul tells us in today's New Testament lesson.

Last night's movie was *How to Train Your Dragon 2*. If you weren't there don't worry. It will all come together in today's sermon. *How to Train Your Dragon 2*... a story about a young person named Hiccup, his father named Stoick, and his free-spirited mother named Valka.

If Hiccup's father is Stoick, which we think of as being serious and not showing emotions, and his mother is the free-spirited Valka, then Hiccup is stuck right in the middle.

This makes sense since the word hiccup can mean being stuck, like a hiccup in a computer program that keeps it from moving forward. As in, "Oh, that's just a technological hiccup; it'll get going soon."

Well, the story of Stoick, Valka and Hiccup is one in which the world is stuck, stuck between the old ways and an as-yet unknown but ultimately wonderful new way. Stoick is chief of a Viking village named Berk, where he happily lives with his son, Hiccup. Valka is missing and presumed dead, the casualty of an earlier time when Vikings attacked, captured and tamed Dragons. They did this out of fear and self-preservation.

Well, that's actually not unlike the situation Paul faces in Galatia. In Galatia, the recent Jewish converts (think of them as the Vikings) wanted to (quote, unquote) "tame" or control the Gentile converts, forcing them to be circumcised, to adopt the Jewish traditions.

Remember, all Christians at the time of Paul were either Jewish or Gentile. They had different traditions and practices, either Jewish or Gentile. So, if the Jewish converts are like the Vikings with their old traditions, and the Gentiles are like the Dragons just wanting to live free, then Paul is kind of like Hiccup, stuck in the middle.

Just like Hiccup doesn't like it that Vikings capture and tame dragons, Paul doesn't like it that Jewish converts want to circumcise Gentile converts. Both Paul and Hiccup envision a world in which Jews and Gentiles, Vikings and Dragons live free in common faith and purpose, no one better than the other.

Wouldn't it be great if we all lived in common faith and purpose, as human beings, as a country, as a church? And here comes the Apostle Paul, passionate about us achieving that unity.

Paul relates to both the old ways of the established traditions and the new way that Christ ushers in. Paul was once a Jewish Pharisee (just as traditional as it gets), and then he became an evangelical Christian, just as passionate as one can be.

And standing there in the middle, Paul is tasked with bringing together the Jewish and Gentiles worlds, just like Hiccup was tasked with bringing together the world of the Vikings and the world of the Dragons. Listen to this dialogue from last night's movie and see if you don't see the similarity.

Valka says to her son, Hiccup, "You have the heart of a chief (like his father Stoick) and the soul of a dragon (like his free-spirited mother Valka). Only you, can bring our worlds together," she says. That "is who you are, son." And sure enough, by the end of the movie (spoiler alert), Hiccup has brought the world of Vikings and the world of Dragons into harmony, thriving under a common vision and purpose.

And of course, for us, Christ is bringing us into harmony – in the fullness of time and moment by moment – to likewise thrive *under a common faith and purpose*. Getting from where we are now to a place of common faith and purpose is not easy. In order to come together, we have to set aside our differences. And yet doesn't it seem today like society is being pulled in different directions, like there's no middle ground anymore.

There's no compromise when it comes to politics. No happy medium between rich and poor. Adult children are being pulled in both directions, between raising their children and caring for their parents. There's no time to be a kid anymore – you go straight from being a child to planning the rest of your life. What happened to the time in between, the middle way, a little space just to be?

The reason we feel pulled in so many directions is the same reason Paul and the Christians of his day felt pulled in different directions – because they were in the middle of change; we are in the middle of change.

Being in the middle of change is the most uncomfortable place to be. It's uncomfortable for kids entering their teenage years, for young adults going from college to career, it's uncomfortable for anyone in a midlife crises, and it's uncomfortable for older adults facing the physical and mental limitations of aging.

Now take all of this uncomfortableness and blow it up to a global scale, a system-wide shift, a cultural transformation, do that, and you have what this world is going through right now. It's enough to tear you apart.

But fear not, there is a place of safety and security to stand in transformational times such as these. And that place is *our higher calling in Christ*.

This is what Paul was telling the Galatians – that despite their differences as Jews and Gentiles they are united in Christ. And the same is true for us. Despite any differences among us – and any fears or concerns these differences give rise to – we are united in Christ.

And we ought to behave like it. Even when our differences threaten our very existence, we stay true to our faith, because our faith tells us we have nothing to fear, something new and wonderful is about to arise.

We see this with the Jews and Gentiles of Paul's day. They felt their very existence threatened as the importance of their differences was challenged. Paul says as much, earlier in Galatians 3, where he says, "There is no longer Jew or Greek (you don't exist), there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

And then today, in Galatians 6, he says, "... Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything" – your current identity, your current way of doing things, your current way of measuring success or failure – it means nothing. "But," adds Paul, "a new creation is everything!"

A new creation is everything! So that's our choice. Stay stuck in the old way of looking at things, the old way of doing things, the old way of responding to things, or embrace a new creation, a new way.

It is scary for us to embrace a new creation, a new way of being, particularly when society is stuck in its old ways. I mean look at the political landscape – we're stuck in between the old and the new. And yet change is happening, something new is arising.

Or, take our educational systems as an example. We have to find a way of making education a priority in this country, from the halls of politics to the table in the kitchen.

And then, of course, there is church and religion. We are certainly in that "in-between" place where nothing is real comfortable, nothing seems to work just right. What are we to do?

Well, just because things are uncertain and uncomfortable right now is no reason to abandon the foundation of our faith, no reason to overlook the essentials of a good education (in addressing the education issue), no reason to trample upon the basic principals of our democracy, as our country seeks its next president.

In fact, it's just at times like this when we need to return to the core principles that made this country great – politically, educationally, and spiritually. "For freedom," says Paul, "Christ has set us free" – Set Free to Be. But not be what we were before, but rather, be something new. We are set free to be a new creation, and that means, being set free from our old way of being. And as scary as that is, it's a great way forward, a faithful way to move forward.

The movie last night opened with the words, “This ... is Berk,” which is the name of the Viking village. And it closed with the same words: “This is Berk” – but it wasn’t the same Berk, it was a new Berk, a new creation. The Viking village successfully moved from that in-between place to a place of unity and purpose.

Or, as Hiccup puts it, “... We may be small in numbers, but we stand for something bigger than anything the world can pit against us. We are the voice of peace, and bit by bit, we will change this world.”

Well my friends, as Christians, we are the voice of peace, and unity. And bit by bit, united in Christ, *we will change this world, for the better. Amen.*

Pastoral Prayer

O God, as we come to you in prayer, quiet our minds. In the stillness, let us center our thoughts on you.

We rush about in the busyness of our lives and try to do well, but we confess we fall short of the mark. We do a bit here and a bit there – but how often do we think about what you would have us do, who you would have us be?

There is so much that needs fixing in our world, and instead of focusing, we confess that we tend to do nothing. Overwhelmed by what seems impossible to change, we change nothing.

So help us now to listen with our whole selves. Let possibilities for what we might do to make our world a better place float through our thoughts.

Open our hearts, O God, so that what you would have us do is known to us. Help us to remember that this still place of prayer is always open to us, if we but listen.

Let enthusiasm replace doubts and give us a vision of what might be. Keep us mindful of your promise that we can do all things through the one who strengthens us, the one who taught us to pray and pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we
forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**