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“Not I...”: Having an Inner Life

Text: Galatians 2: 15-21

Paul’s understanding of what the gospel is all about is summed up in these few words from his letter to the churches in Galatia: “...we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.” This is to say that we are made right with God and the world not by anything that we do, but by our faith in Christ. Paul goes on to explain how this is the case: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives within in me.” We are made right because Christ who is all righteousness lives at the center of our lives. Thus, our very movements, when they are movements of faith, are movements of God. Faith is what lets God in, and makes us God’s.

It is in this understanding of what Christ meant that the New Testament and all its stories find their interpretive center for the Christian church. It is this understanding that more than three hundred years later would lay at the center of Augustine’s presentation of the Christian faith and that under Augustine’s influence would then shape Christian thinking for a thousand years. Then, made alive once again in Luther and Calvin, it was the key to the reformation of the church. Thus, we can confidently say, in these words *is* what the good news of Jesus Christ is about.

They are only a few words, and they have been repeated time and time again since Paul wrote them. Yet, despite their familiarity, it is incredibly difficult to say in a few words, or in an image or metaphor what exactly they mean for us. It is hard to know what we are supposed to do if this is the gospel. These words may be basic Paul and basic Christianity, yet it is hard to see

what the radical alternative is that they are pointing us to.

Not that we don't try to imagine what Paul is talking about. But often we fail miserably at it. For example, many people assume that when Paul says it is not by works but by faith that we are made right that he means that we don't have to do anything but believe. On this account, Paul sees the gospel of Christ as lowering the standards for the kingdom of God, not raising them. All we have to do is to say that we believe. When we think this way, while we succeed in imagining the free and gracious part of what Paul is aiming at, we also end up making it cheap.

Sometimes, too, we simply psychologize what he is trying to say. For example, many thinkers have claimed that what Paul is talking about is found by recognizing that the law represents obsession and/or compulsion. Faith, on the other hand, and the grace that gives rise to faith, represents freedom. Well, to be sure it does, but that is at best half of what Paul was really talking about. For it is crucial to understand that what he means by the faith that makes us free is in the rest of what he says: "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives within me." This is no mere psychological category. This is no mere matter of God looking the other way with respect to our foibles and giving us what we want anyhow. This is about a living relation between God and us, a relation wherein it is not I, but Christ within me, that gives me life.

That is not easy to grasp. To illustrate how hard it is, consider how Augustine put it. He was accurate and pithy, but highly paradoxical, when he commented on this passage saying, "When I am not I, I am more happily I." Accurate as that might be, and it is, I suspect at first hearing it doesn't clear much of anything up.

However, recently, a way to think about what Paul means and what Augustine means suggested itself to me. What I want to claim is that what Paul is talking about is this: faith is a matter of having an inner life, and having an inner life consists in Christ being in us. That is what

puts us right with God.

Let me first explain why having an inner life is so important in this way. Many of you may recognize the name of Krista Tippett, who hosts a very interesting and very good program on Sunday morning on NPR titled “Speaking of Faith.” On it, she conducts interviews of some considerable depth and sensitivity with people who might well be called pioneers of the Spirit in our day. Tippett, however, did not start out either in radio or even in religion. Rather, after graduating from Brown and winning a Fulbright, she first served in Germany with the diplomatic corps in the days before the Berlin Wall came down. It was a heady experience. As she described it, she says: “I sat around dinner tables with famous people, beautiful people, powerful people, and also around conference tables with men, mostly men, who were moving nuclear missiles around like Tonka Toys on a map of Europe.”

She then goes on to describe those men, and the overall moral experience she had in those days. “I was rattled by the contradictions in the lives around me. There was a chasm between the genuine importance of the issues at hand and the moral maturity of some of the people who were defining those issues and literally running the world. In our time, *immorality* is a shrunken word, suggestive only of sexual impropriety. But up close to power at a young age, I experienced a problem deeper and more basic: powerful people often had impoverished inner lives. Foreign policy giants who could deliver brilliant speeches on strategy and disarmament were in private shockingly immature, emotionally stuck in adolescence.”

As Tippett describes it, this contradiction worried her, as it ought to have. Having no inner life, or an immature one, she worried would prevent these men from ever getting to the root of the human problems they were addressing with high policy. I think she is right, but her theme also needs to be generalized. The problem she saw is not only one belonging to those in high and

powerful positions. The problem is universal. Those who have no inner life, or who remain perpetual adolescents, powerful or not, have somehow failed at life and can be dangerous to others. They can be fun, they can be powerful, they can be beautiful, they can even be the most interesting man or woman in the world, but without an inner life there is most always something missing and something wrong. They can be petty office tyrants, they can be vain, and let their sense of self-importance sabotage good projects when they feel slighted. At home and with friends, their demand for their own pleasure or to be the center of attention can ruin relations and damage others. They are restless. Above, people with no inner life rarely can put themselves to the side in the interest of a larger good. They themselves are not often very happy, and have no depth of feeling, including any sense of joy, and, if even they did, they would probably confuse it with pleasure. So, it is for these negative reasons alone, having an inner life is important.

What, positively, though, does it mean to have an inner life? I think we can all recognize what it means. For example, we all know first of all that the person who has an inner life has resources, resources for dealing with life and for dealing well with others. A person with an inner life is not necessarily a contemplative or an introvert, although he or she is not desperate or anxious when alone, and she certainly reflects accurately upon failures as well as successes. Somebody who has an inner life also has *depth*; his moral knowledge is not made up of platitudes and cliches. Depth here is not at all the same thing as having a rich fantasy life, just as having an inner life doesn't mean that somewhere in the middle of our gut there is a little private room where we can go, a little private "me-cave." Actually having an inner life is quite the opposite of being isolated or alone in the world. People who have an inner life do better at relating well to others than people who don't have such a life. So, having an inner life means that one is a person of substance and a person of resources and a person of moral imagination. A

person who has an inner life is one who can draw from substance within himself to deal rightly with the world. He or she doesn't flounder or cast about to check to see how others do it, or to get their approval.

But how do we get such an inner life? Clearly, we are not born with one. Well, consider here something that the great Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar once suggested. It goes a long way in helping us to distinguish the real article from all pretenders. Balthasar suggested that when human beings, Adam and Eve if you will, were created, that they were created with an empty space at their center. God created that empty space so that God himself could fill it. All humans had to do was to wait patiently, and to keep the space open.

However, Balthasar goes on, they became anxious as humans always do when they have to wait, and when they have to remain open to others. Thus they started trying to fill the space themselves; they tried to give themselves an inner life. They felt unfulfilled, which they were, and thus in order to be full human beings they starting stuffing that empty space with, well, *stuff*. But you can't give yourself an inner life; it's like trying to loan yourself money – at the end of the day, you still won't have anymore than you started with. Thus if you don't yet have depth, or resources, then you don't have anything worthwhile with which to fill that space properly. And, of course, in any case, anxiety clouds your judgment about what is important and what is not. So you start filling the space with things that look like, but only look like, they might satisfy – power, glory, the adulation and admiration of others, pleasure and even the material reminders of those things. But those things don't give us a real inner life. They do give us anger and disappointment and depression, though, when it dawns on us that they don't work. They do make us even more anxious when we suspect that we really are still empty after all. As a result we try even harder to fill ourselves, with pretty much the same results every time. Yet, even though we

don't succeed in giving ourselves an inner life in this way, and cannot, what inevitably does happen is that we come to believe that, nevertheless, we really are all these things we have stuffed ourselves with. As a result, we are loathe to give them up, because we think that we in losing them are losing life itself.

It was for all these reasons that Plato, in noting this phenomenon of trying to make an inner life by pouring things into ourselves, said that our souls are like leaky vats. T.S. Eliot also described it well, when he described our age as being one where the "hollow men, the stuffed men" had triumphed.

So, if this is precisely how *not* to have an inner life, what ought one to do? How does one have an inner life? Simply reverse the process. Instead of filling oneself up with ersatz elements of real life, one needs to start emptying them out. If we have come to think that we are really all those things, then we above all need to realize that they are not really us. This is precisely what Augustine meant when he said "When I am not I, I am more happily I" We come much closer to being the person God would have us be, we come much closer to real happiness, when we quit trying so blasted hard to establish ourselves. In this way, the person who has a genuine inner life, is precisely, as we all know full well, the one who is least taken with his or her own ego. The difference between the person who has no inner life or resources and the one who does almost always is the difference between egocentricity and a capacity for selflessness. The person with an inner life of depth, resource and imagination is the person most capable of setting his own self aside in the interests of what is best – for others, and for all the world.

But this is only the beginning of how we come to have an inner life. For having an inner life isn't just a life of emptying out. It is a life of fulfillment and a life of pouring out life. The reason that we need to empty out the stuff we have put at the center of our lives is so that the

center can be filled with the real thing. It is a process that philosophers and artists and pioneers of the spiritual life attempt, so that they can hear what is being spoken to them, and so that they can then express it in words and in art. But that process is not just an intellectual one nor is it just for the spiritually avant garde. It is also the process of simple faith. Here the faith of the theologian, and the faith of the Down's Syndrome child is exactly alike. For what faith is, is keeping our center open, and faith is the waiting upon God until God comes to fill that center. Faith is the welcoming of God into our lives, and letting God be at the center of our lives.

That is why faith alone makes us right with the world. For it is faith alone that lets us be God's, that lets God's own Word dwell behind all our words, and that makes all that we do a matter of being moved by God's Spirit. Faith is a matter of letting the Christ within us be our inner teacher, as both Calvin and Augustine put it. Faith is letting God be God, and not trying to be little gods ourselves. And that is why it puts us right with the world, for it teaches us what the maker and end of the world really wants for the world, and it puts that God at the center of our lives.