

## Sermon by Bishop Samuel Zeiser based on Galatians 3:1-3

### Festival Worship Service at the close of Synod Assembly, June 18, 2016

It was his first day on the job, but Doris fell for him the like instantly. They boarded the elevator with other workers, she found herself standing behind him. Going up, the opportunity presented itself. She stole the yellow #2 pencil from his backpack. The rest of the movie "Hello, My Name is Doris" traces Doris' bold endeavor to land him. Never mind he's at least 30 years younger.

That's the fun part of the movie. From there it goes pretty deep emotionally, however, as Doris's life unfolds: never married; apart from her bookkeeping job at a rather trendy company, Doris devoted her life to her mother, living in the same house; nephew tells her she dresses like a clown (and that's pretty kind). And...she's a hoarder. A hoarder is someone who throws away nothing, and cannot stop accumulating things. Now this is an educated woman, financially secure; but there's no getting through to her about the way she's cluttered up her life.

She's a lot like the people in the Galatian churches: financially secure. The Galatian churches gave the Apostle Paul reason for encouragement. And they did not disappoint. *Jesus Christ publicly exhibited as crucified!* Whatever that meant, after hearing Paul preach it, they abolished their former religious ways. Superstitions? Drop kicked into the Black Sea! Demons? Evicted to the Oasis of Ammon in the Ptolemaic Empire! All those pagan gods? Replaced by "the one God." And get this: as a result of *Jesus Christ publicly exhibited as crucified*, the Galatian churches extended freedom to slaves and equality to women. So, rostered leaders: imagine Paul filling out his Parochial Report for the year 48, reporting that kind of activity to in those rectangular boxes. Paul preached, they believed and received the Holy Spirit, and miracles among them began to occur.

This is what Paul was after: believers in the God who, in the death and resurrection of Jesus, saved the world. The God who set the relationship right with God's people and with all creation. The word preached, faith arisen, would be the mission field of the Holy Spirit, and in Paul's words, miracles in their midst. *Jesus Christ publicly exhibited as crucified.* It was Paul's early draft of "saved by grace through faith."

Then Paul moved on to other locations in Asia Minor. When he reached either Ephesus or Corinth 2 to 3 years later, word reached him that the Galatian churches were slipping away. It was the work of Paul's opponents - opponents who emphasized that it takes religious laws (Torah) and upholding ritual practices (circumcision) in order to maintain a right relationship with God. Paul was furious: *You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?* Paul's focus on *Jesus Christ publicly exhibited as crucified* went by the wayside. The hoarding had started in their faith practices...and made its way into their relationship with God.

Not one to walk away from a fight, the Apostle Paul penned a letter. You've just heard part of the salvo levelled at the Galatian churches. He continued: *The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?*

"Doing the works of the law...ending with the flesh:" I'm guessing there must have been some real appeal in the message of Paul's opponents, drawing the Galatian churches away. Give them a break! How are these Galatian churches supposed to get their arms around "saved by grace through faith?" A check list is better. These are the things to do, and those are the ones you avoid. Want proof I am right with God? I can show you! All of this makes the relationship to God just a little easier to grasp. For Paul, however, this law and ritual stuff was clutter in the believer's relationship to God.

Clutter! You know, like Doris Miller's clutter. The piles and piles of stuff, the boxes filled with stuff, the mountains of stuff, and junk and worthless clutter slowly gave definition to her life. That's what the yellow #2 pencil was about. It was something to hold onto, refer to (like a checklist).

That's Paul's message to the foolish, bewitched Galatian churches. They had fallen under the influence of those who would clutter their healthy relationship to "Jesus Christ publicly exhibited as crucified." Foolish, bewitched Galatians!

What about the churches of the Northeastern PA Synod? Is there clutter that needs our attention? On the threshold of 500 years of Reformati0on heritage, are synod congregations

- Communities of faith bewitched by the hoarding that comes with the clutter of efforts aimed at numbers: numbers of people (especially young people); who look only at financial constraints when considering possibilities for the congregation's future;
- Communities of faith bewitched by the clutter that insists that God's call today is lived out by hearkening back to bygone days.

Are we holding on to cherished stuff for all the wrong reasons, creating a clutter we do not see but that seems so odd to those on the outside? Are we fooling ourselves about the value of this clutter because we are addicted to a congregational nostalgia that obscures reality? Are we doing the same things repeatedly, leashed to a life-draining mission statement – a statement composed *not* of words but of routine actions so numbing that they mask the inevitable coming of a crippling pain that has loomed larger and larger for decades? I'm guessing there must be some real appeal in all the clutter.

Paul's appeal to the Galatian churches sounded an alarm, warning about the accumulation of clutter building up in their relationship to Jesus Christ. The effect of the clutter diminished the work of Christ and lifted up *their* efforts to reconcile with God. Paul would not abide the 1<sup>st</sup> Century clutter in the Galatian churches just getting underway. We ought not abide any 21<sup>st</sup> Century clutter in our churches.

“Immediately [the paralyzed man] stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God. Amazement seized all of them...they were filled with awe, saying, ‘We have seen strange things today.’” [Luke 5:25-26] Strange things; miracles!

When was the last time you departed a worship service, or a committee meeting, or a council meeting and thought: we have seen strange things today? Imagine the strange things, miracles, that God has in store for churches uncluttered in their faith, uncluttered in their focus on serving the neighbor in need through ministries that have the words “Jesus Christ publicly exhibited as crucified” written all over them.