

Christmas 1, Year A
Galatians 3:21-25, 4:4-7
December 30, 2007
Bill Ellis

In our passage for today from Paul's letter to the Galatians the apostle employs two metaphors. The first is that of the law as a "disciplinarian" a force or power that raises us properly, keeps us safe and teaches us what we need to know until such time as we are able to stand on our own two feet. The second metaphor is that of the slave and the child of the household. Both metaphors are important expressions of the truth about life with God, but this morning I want to focus on that second one, the one that compares the slave and the child. Maybe I am doing this because I just finished a marathon session watching the entire BBC production of *Bleak House*, but maybe also I am doing this because this metaphor expresses a truth that is little understood or appreciated in a society that doesn't use slaves at all, or employ servants quite as routinely as Paul's did.

There are a few important similarities between servants and the children of the household, especially as these relationships were experienced in Paul's day. First, both are in a dependency relationship with the head or heads of the house. When Paul wrote these letters many servants and slaves lived in the house with their masters, and so were provided with shelter, food, and protection, just as the children were. In addition to this there were at least times when the relationship of slave or servant to master was one of genuine love and

mutual affection. Those who have in fact either seen or read *Bleak House* will recall that Lady Dedlock really did have a great deal of affection for Rosa her personal servant, and the feeling was mutual. I would imagine that in Paul's day, as in our time now, that same kind of thing goes on. Finally, the master of the house had control over the person of both the slave or servant and the child. The head of the house, in other words, effectively owned both servant or slave and child. In the case of master and slave that right was conveyed by ownership that arose through an economic transaction, and in the case of master and child that right was conveyed by ownership that arose from parentage. Thus, superficially at least the difference between child of the household and servant could appear at times to be small.

But as we know, that appearance is deceiving; for the differences between slave or servant and child were vast, and they emerged from that last similarity, the question of how ownership arose. The kind of ownership the master had over the slave or servant meant that the relationship between the two was rooted in what the servant or slave could earn, and how that servant could satisfy the master and thus stay safe from the master's wrath. For that relationship would exist only so long as the master was happy with what the servant or slave was doing. The instant the master became unhappy the servant could be turned out into the street or the slave sold to another owner, and thus the relationship was in effect a bargain of goods in exchange for services, and at the heart of that relationship for the servant, no matter how good it might be, was fear.

Most of us understand this pretty well because even though we have never seen slaves, and the vast majority of us don't employ full time servants, a lot of us have jobs that we worry about losing, and so understand that bargain based relationship between boss and worker or board and executive has a least a tinge of fear associated with it. We also know that these relationships are based on production, and that no matter how much we may like our boss, or know that our boss likes us, if we don't produce we don't work, at least not for long.

Now certainly children can live in fear as well, and I imagine Paul knew that, and that is perhaps why he emphasized the inheritance that is rightfully part of being a child of the family. The relationship between child and parent, fearful as it may be from time to time, is not a bargain based upon production, for the child belongs to the family simply by virtue of being born into it. The child has a birth right that is part of the reality of the situation, one that is not subject to how well the child performs certain duties. Because of this the child belongs to the family in a way a servant or slave can never belong. One may be a dutiful and loving son or daughter, or a willful and irresponsible son or daughter, but one never stops being a son or daughter no matter what happens. I suppose it is quite possible, at least theoretically, that a parent might at some point stop loving that son or daughter, but I have a hard time imagining that in real life. Even David continued to love Absalom after Absalom rebelled and tried to usurp David's throne.

What Paul is saying is that in Christ our relationship to God is like that of the parent to the child, and not like that of the slave or servant to the master. This is an important point, because even though we have heard this many times, we often act like we don't really believe it. Quite often people act like their relationship with God is like that of the slave to the master. They imagine that it is the bargain based relationship that hinges on whether or not we perform our tasks properly so as to keep God happy with us. And so people, perfectly faithful people I might add, imagine that if they go to church enough, and if they give enough, and if they are kind enough to other people and if do a bunch of other things that "good Christians" do, then God will love them and keep them in the household.

What Paul is saying today is pretty simple but pretty significant. Don't live that way, don't live with that kind of fear at the heart of your spirituality, because it is a fear based in something that isn't true. "You are not slaves, but children, and if children, then heirs." That is the truth of the matter. So of course we are to love, but not in order to get God to love us. The love that grows must grow as a response to the love we have received if it is to be truly healthy, just exactly as a child learns to love in response to the love she receives from her parents. Of course we are called to be generous and compassionate, but not because we are afraid that God will not be generous and compassionate with us, but rather as a response to the compassion and generosity of God. Paul's point is that in Christ we have a relationship that is as indelibly organic as the genetic

relationship between parent and child. We can abuse that relationship, but we cannot destroy it, because it is rooted in God's adoption of us as children, not in our acceptance of God as parent, and we can't change God's mind about us no matter what we do.

So today Paul calls upon us to live with the kind of compassion, generosity, love and confidence that comes from being the children of God and heirs of God's kingdom. He calls us to root our spirituality in the love that God has for us, and not in the fear that we will be thrown out if we don't do everything exactly right. It is not an excuse to misbehave, any more than having the unconditioned love of a parent is an excuse for the children to misbehave, but is rather a call to us to live out of our very best selves.

For what I will call a "slave mentality" as quite distinct from the people who were forced to live as slaves - some of whom were truly noble - is a debased way to live. It is rooted in fear, and tends to produce only so much as is necessary to fulfill the bargain made and keep the master from becoming angry. It is a way, in other words, to see God as the enemy, as the one we must please or else get in trouble, and therefore as one to be avoided when possible and placated when not. That is not the heart of Christian faith, even though when we think about it at all I suspect we can find points in all our lives when that sort of thinking has characterized our understanding of God and our relationship with God. We are called instead to live as children of God, which is what we are, and so to abandon fear, and to realize that our relationship is rooted not in a bargain,

but in that love which God bears for us all. So today we have an important metaphor before us, one that reminds us of the whole basis of our life with God. God has made us children and heirs, not slaves. Our call is not just to appreciate the difference, but to live into it.