

After having heard the readings for this weekend read twice, I am somewhat disappointed in myself that I didn't write a sermon on Jesus' words in Luke about having the "authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy." We had a snake in the yard the other day. I didn't tread on it; I ran from it. I could have used a sermon on "treading on snakes."

But it was Paul—Paul in Galatians who called my name this week. How he starts the reading reminded me of our "Roar with Rohr" Vacation Bible School adult class last week when we heard Rohr suggest that sin is what doesn't work. For many Christians for a long time sin has been a checklist, albeit an arbitrary one which often is more about us than God. The checklist seemed to determine, as Rohr claims, whether God likes us or not. You do this, and he doesn't like you. And you don't do that he does like you. This view has caused many people to become too preoccupied with sin because we want God to like us. Trust me, as a pastor, I get to experience that kind of understanding and preoccupation all the time. For some folks, I am viewed as the sin-checklist police. When I arrive, you got to do something about the language, the drinking, and the dirty-story telling. You got to perform better when it comes to the checklist.

While I think sin is a very important matter that needs to be named and probably more multifaceted than what Rohr is getting at, I nonetheless wonder if Rohr is not reflecting some of the spirit of Paul in today's reading from Galatians: "Don't be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow."

Now, often people have interpreted that as "you get what you deserve." I can't believe that this is Paul's understanding since he knows his own life well. And he realizes that he has received a whole lot more mercy than he has ever deserved. But I think Paul is honest enough to know that when you plant dissension (which is really his topic here in Galatians), you are going to get dissension. When you work to tear people apart, you are going to get disunity. When you pollute the water you are going to get polluted water. Don't make any mistake about it. You reap what you sow.

Paul's big concern in Galatians is a group of teachers who are influencing church communities with their teaching that a person needs to become Jewish first before he or she can become Christian. The issue really is the ever-present and forever-uncomfortable subject of circumcision. Paul opposes those who claim that everyone (I guess "everyone" doesn't include women) has to be circumcised before they are prepared to be Christian. All new converts, whether they are Jewish or not, must be circumcised, these teachers are proclaiming. Paul believes that this teaching is a stumbling block, is creating all kinds of dissent and is tearing communities apart. He's not happy. If life is going to be about the flesh, he says, if life is going to be about certain fleshly rituals, if life is going to be about how *human beings* determine worth and belonging, then what you will get is really not what you want. What you will get is a broken community, a family torn apart. The works of the flesh don't get us what we want; they don't work, as Richard Rohr says. You reap what you sow.

So, Paul claims, whenever we have opportunity, we are to *work* for the good of all. The good of all is what sowing to the Spirit is all about. The work of the Spirit is about building up, not tearing down. Sowing to the Spirit gets us unified communities, gets us what we want.

Paul gets quite passionate about his message, about the significance of sowing to the Spirit, in the second part of the reading today. What he has got to say is so important, he's so worked up, that it appears that he has taken into his own hand the writing utensil. Great writers and thinkers like Paul often had scribes who wrote for them. In Galatians, he's grabbed the pen, if you will, and is writing in big letters so that people will get his message.

The people who are insisting on circumcision, Paul says, are doing so only so that they can be popular, so that they don't have to experience the pain that occurs when people disagree with you. And what's more, he claims, these pro-circumcision people don't really do what they say they want other people to do.

Haven't you noticed this often to be true? People who are zealous about whatever topic they think is so significant often don't practice what they preach. I have to admit that when I encounter people who are so doggone certain about things, who go on moral crusades, I often say, "What

are you hiding? Thou protesteth too much,” as Shakespeare once penned. For Paul, the folks who are on the moral crusade of circumcision are doing so because they want to get points. They want to feel good about the number of converts that they have.

Keeping score is what the works of the flesh are all about. Who is more popular? Who has gotten more votes? Whose opinion wins the political or religious arguments? This is what the flesh wants to know. The flesh wants to look good. The flesh is worried about who comes out on top, who has the most money, who is the most moral, who fits in the best. The flesh wants to *boast*, as Paul would put it. The flesh is so worried about our fragile needy selves that it is working very hard to win because, after all, what are we worth if we don't win.

Paul says that he doesn't boast about anything except the “cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.” A primary focus for Paul in the Christian faith is the cross. And obviously, the cross is not a sign of winning. In some ways, it is a sign of losing. But for Paul, this sign is what life is fundamentally about. At the cross is where God is to be discovered. If God is about connecting to the world through a cross, then all of *our* attempts to connect to God through *our* successes, *our* winning, *our* making points, *our* proving ourselves are revealed for what they are: shams. For Paul, God is not Someone to climb to, Someone to reach through all of our feeble attempts to prove ourselves. No, God reaches us through a cross, comes to us, meets us right where we live. Life, therefore, is not about proving ourselves. It is not about climbing anywhere. It is not about justifying ourselves. No, life is about a God who discovers us in a dying, suffering man on a cross. Wow! That changes things.

Paul then describes the change in this way: “For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything.” For Paul, and I say, for us, in Christ crucified there is a whole new world. The famous Lutheran thinker of the past century Paul Tillich says, “Christianity is more than a religion; it is a message of a new creation.”

So often we sell our faith as a better religion with better rituals, better doctrines, better songs, better liturgies or lack thereof. For Paul Tillich, that is what Paul means by circumcision, everything we would call “religion.”

Now don't get me wrong, I like religion. It pays my bills. But I recognize that the end game for us is not circumcision, not religion, but a

new creation. This is what we need to share with others as we reach out to new people. In Christ crucified we have discovered a new creation, a whole new way of doing business, a whole new reality. This new creation is not about getting religion right, about all the stuff with which some religious people can become preoccupied.

And it also is not about uncircumcision, what Paul Tillich describes as “everything called secular that still makes religious claims.” Call those things our political ideologies, our projects to change the world, all the non-religious stuff that we use to prove ourselves and our worth.

Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision matters. None of our attempts to earn our way, prove ourselves ultimately will work or will get us what we want. Being super religious or being non-religious won't take us where we want to go. These works of the flesh often end up just being feeble attempts on our part to elevate ourselves at the expense of others. And guess what? We will reap what we sow. All of our clamoring to prove ourselves will wear us out and will divide our communities and families.

But in Christ there is a whole new creation, a new creation discovered in a crucified one. It is not all about proving ourselves, being right, having a better religion than other people, achieving a higher score than others. It's not about this religious rite or that religious rite. It's not about speaking everything just right. It's not about right politics. It's about a God who meets us in the midst of failure, our lack of success, our pain, all of our clamoring to discover our worth, all of our silly activity which we engage in to make us feel better about ourselves, so that we may be taken to a whole new world—a world where finally grace prevails, a world where you are met by love that comes to you not because you have climbed up to it but because it is sheer gift to you.

Note how the disciples in our gospel reading are so overjoyed by all of their good works! They've earned lots of points. They've gotten a lot of converts. They have cast out a lot of demons. And Jesus says, “Don't be joyous about the points, even though you can do lots of good things, including treading on snakes. But don't rejoice in that! Rejoice that your name has been written in heaven. Rejoice in the gift. Rejoice in something much larger than what you can do.”

True joy comes when I am discovered by the new creation for which I am not responsible. What matters most in life is gift! Rejoice! And my bet is that this kind of rejoicing will get us what we want, will build up our communities, not tear them down.