

The Holy Name – Year B – January 4, 2012 - Homily
Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 8; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:15-21
Susan E. Wilmot

Happy New Year everyone! Since it's so early in this new year, it seems like a good time to talk about our New Year's resolutions! I was actually surprised to see the top five new year's resolutions on the Dick Clark New Year's Eve TV special, because "losing weight" was *not* the number one resolution in that particular poll. The number one resolution for 2012 was "save more money". How about you? Did anyone make any resolutions for this year? How's that working out for you? Sadly, most of us generally don't stick to our New Year's resolutions for very long. But we may get an interesting insight into why that is through tonight's reading from Galatians.

Tonight's reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians gives us the perfect opportunity to examine the tension between law and grace, or what we might think of today as the difference between trying to gain God's blessings or inheritance verses accepting God's gift of grace through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Martin Luther held to the importance of distinguishing between the law and the gospel of grace made flesh in Jesus Christ. Luther said it this way, "Nearly the entire Scripture and the understanding of all theology hangs on the right understanding of law and gospel." Practically speaking, the big difference is about choosing whether to be a slave under the law, or an heir of God's grace through faith. Paul makes the point nice and clear for us in this part of his letter to the church. Let's take a look at what he's telling us.

Years before the Gospel of Luke gave us such a beautiful and detailed account of the birth of Jesus, Paul had already written his letter to the fledgling Christian community in Galatia. Paul helps us to rediscover the meaning of Christmas. The birth of our Savior Jesus Christ is more than God's incredible intervention into the world. Jesus' life, His death and resurrection all have a distinct and divine purpose. Only Jesus, God incarnate can fulfill the law, and thereby redeem the whole of creation. Only Jesus, the Word made flesh, can free us from slavery under the law, to become children and co-heirs of God's kingdom. Only Jesus, as God's son, became fully human, and by His death and resurrection exalted strangers, orphans, and slaves to the status of family. Whether we are born under the law, or are strangers to it, we come into relationship with God in Christ Jesus by the grace of adoption. We are all invited to accept God's gift, and experience the rebirth of His saving grace in our hearts and in our lives.

The Gospel always invites us to respond to God's grace and mercy as our lives are transformed in Him. The promise of Jesus' birth is freedom. We have been made free to live reconciled and reconciling lives in Him. We are called to discern and act in new ways by which God continually extends a gracious invitation to accept His gift of freedom. As we know in Christ's birth, the gift of God's gospel and grace is particularly extended to those considered and treated as "others or outsiders, as inferiors or strangers, and those who are marginalized" by society, and by the church. There have always been slaves and slavery. Old and new forms of slavery pop up at different times in culture and in different contexts. Not so long ago, the most segregated hour of the week was Sunday at 10:00am. In some areas of the country, racism is still alive and well, despite the law of the land. We still struggle with accepting anything or anyone that discomforts us or challenges our understanding of who should and should not be in church, or who should or should not be accepted as part of God's family. There's an ongoing issue with some members of our faith traditions over our welcoming inclusiveness for our brothers and sisters in Christ who also happen to be gay or lesbian. The gospel of grace, the Good News of Jesus Christ always confronts

us to live out our Christian values of hospitality, peace, freedom and justice, especially wherever and whenever Christ's values and relationships are resisted or denied. Discerning Christ's truth and freedom in our lives is an ongoing task sustained by the hope of the Holy Spirit. The full impact and truth of the Christmas gift of freedom from slavery takes time to grow in our lives. It takes us time to grow into our rich and abundant inheritance as children of God. It takes time to understand that in the cross of Christ the way is opened wide to welcome all into the community of God's family through faith in Christ Jesus.

Our new year begins with the promise, hope, gift and anticipation of time. Just like the difference between law and the Gospel of grace, there is a difference in how we approach our New Year's resolutions. When it comes to the latter, there's a real difference between doing the right thing for the right reasons, and being tempted into doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. We will experience the grace of God giving us the strength, and equipping us to do the right things when we're truly doing them for the right reasons. Whereas when we're relying on self to fulfill the things we feel we ought to do, then we're trapped in slavery, and the law trips us up every time. That may well be why so many of us slip up with our New Year's resolutions. Most of our New Year's resolutions fail, because we've arbitrarily decided for ourselves what we ought to do. We then try to fulfill whatever it is in a way that will never honor God, because we excluded Him from the whole decision making process. Our success really does depend on discerning what God's will is for us, and then honoring that in our lives faithfully, because we deeply desire to please God. So, my prayer or resolution if you like, is that individually, and as a community of faith our year may be filled with doing God's will, and pleasing God.

Amen.