

Showing Up

^{NRS} Gal 6:1 My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. ² Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. ³ For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. ⁴ All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. ⁵ For all must carry their own loads. ⁶ Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher. ⁷ Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. ⁸ If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. ⁹ So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. ¹⁰ So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith. ¹¹ See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand!

¹⁸ May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.

Well we've made it all the way through Paul's letter to the Galatians. And I don't know about you, but I've had a great time. And I feel a little bad about this, because it's obvious Paul had a terrible time with this letter.

Galatians was not a letter Paul enjoyed writing. A couple of things tip us off. On the more subtle end of things we can look at the greetings. Scholars point out that in every other letter Paul writes, there is always this group Paul is greeting and encouraging. You know, he always writes something like, "And say 'Hi' to Aquila for me. And tell Prescus good job and to hang in there, he's doing great!" Even when he has criticisms, Paul is almost always encouraging and friendly. But here in Galatians- none of this. Here he's all business, and the language he uses tells us he's not in a good mood. On the more blunt end of things we can just look at the language and expressions he uses. Now, we didn't read these texts (honestly, I have no idea how to preach them) but in 3:2 he calls the Galatians a bunch of idiots saying, "Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of law or by believing? Are you so stupid having started with the Spirit that you

end now in the flesh?” Paul isn’t exactly making friends and influencing people here. I love it. My favorite though is probably in 5:7, when Paul he takes on those teachers telling the Galatians they need to follow Jewish law along with their faith in Christ. He writes, “You were running so well, who prevented you from keeping on? Whoever is confusing will pay the price. I wish these agitators, obsessive as they are about circumcision, I wish they would go the whole way and castrate themselves!” I you’re your new teachers would just castrate themselves. Wow. Well, isn’t that special? I know I’ve said this before, but this is what is so great about the Bible- it’s really not a nice book, it’s not even a good book most of the time; it’s so much better. It’s an honest book, a real book.

So Paul is cranky. And it makes sense. All the work he did to establish the Galatian church. And then those Judaizers go in and tell everyone faith isn’t enough, that they all have to follow the law, too. It all felt like it was crashing down around him.

But then, and I love this, despite how hopeless he is, despite how angry he is- not only does Paul write to the Galatians, but he does more than this. Here at the very end of the letter, he does something so very kind- touching even. Paul writes the Galatians a personal note using his very own hand.

Now, what do I mean using his very own hand? Didn’t Paul write the whole letter with his own hand? Well, no as a matter of fact. I know most of us, if we think about Paul writing letters at all, we probably imagine him hunched over a desk with a candle for light, and a quill or pen, an inkwell, and an expensive piece of parchment or papyrus scrap to write on. But, and I hate to destroy this image- Paul didn’t actually write his own letters. Paul, like nearly all letter writers in antiquity, made use of what we

call an amanuensis. An amanuensis is a Latin term for a secretary, a scribe, and they were very common. Nearly every letter writer we know of used one- some of them even became kind of famous. Cicero's amanuensis, for instance, was a man named Tiro- Tiro would sometimes pop up and make a comment or add a thought and mark his name by it.

We know less about Paul's amanuensis or amanuenses. All we know is that in First Corinthians, Ephesians, and Galatians, Paul will interrupt the letter at the beginning or at the end and say, "I Paul now write this greeting in my own hand", letting us know the rest of it was physically written by an amanuensis. In Romans it's even kind of comical. At the very end of the letter- and it's more like a book than a dog gone letter. It's like the amanuensis is exhausted and gets a little punchy. In Romans 16:21 Paul is going on and on with this long list of people he's thanking like we were talking about earlier. I mean it's like the academy awards. "I'd like to thank all the little people. Apollo, Lucius, and Nereus..." And then, in v.22, right in the middle of everything, like he can't contain himself any longer, the amanuensis butts in, writing: "And I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, also greet you in the Lord." And then we go right back to the list of greetings.

So no, Paul doesn't actually write most of his letters- he gives dictation to a scribe, like most of his contemporaries. But, unlike some of his snootier friends, Paul actually takes the time to write some of this letter on his own. Here in Galatians he finishes the letter with his own hand. This is why he writes, "Look what large letters I write with using my own hand." Why are the letters so large? We don't know whether his handwriting was just swoopier than his scribe, whether he suffered from some kind of affliction making it difficult to see, or whether he was writing largely as a way of

emphasizing his words- like us writing in all caps or in bold. We don't know- all we know is that he cared enough to take the time to actually get some ink on his hands and write to the Galatians himself.

And I think this is so touching. It's like an ancient version of a handwritten personal note. You know there are a lot of things that are hard for us to understand about the Bible- our world being so different. This one, though, I think we understand maybe better than anyone else who went before us. Personal letter writing is as rare today as it was in Paul's day. In his day you could blame scribes- in ours email is more to blame. But either way- most of the time in our world and in Paul's, people didn't get a whole lot of notes handwritten by the sender.

It's quite something to get a handwritten note, isn't it? It's different than an email. It's different than a call even. These are fine, of course- but with a note, there's just a different sense of presence, isn't there. You can feel that someone actually cared enough about you to sit down, get out some stationary, get a decent pen, write something, put a stamp on their, address it, and then actually get it to the mail. I received a note like this just the other day, and it wasn't long, I'm sure I read emails that day that were longer- but I don't remember any of them. I remember the note I received. It made my day.

I think this is what it must have been like for the Galatians. I can imagine them reading the letter, the script is all the same, written in these tight, terse little letters, and then all of a sudden at the end comes Paul's swoopy, wild handwriting- over the top just like Paul. And just like that, it's like Paul is present with them again- if only in this small way. And even if they didn't like what he had to say to them in the rest of the letter, even

if they didn't like his angry tone- I bet as soon as they see his handwriting- you know their hearts warm up just a little.

Woody Allen once said, "90% of life is just showing up." "90% of life is just showing up." He's so right.

I don't know whether Paul felt like writing them this little personal note- my guess is he didn't. I mean he's obviously mad. There's probably part of him that doesn't even want to write the entire letter- why waste your time on folks who probably aren't going to listen to you, when there are a TON of other people who need his time and attention. But Paul does take the time. He takes the time, and he shows up. In a way that is as personal as the technology will allow- he shows up. Whether he wants to or not. Whether he feels like it or not- he takes the time and shows up.

Our adult ed class read a book a while back by Richard Mouw, the president of Fuller Seminary. It's a short little book called Praying at Burger King. I wasn't able to take part in the class, but I really enjoyed the book- it's just a short little thing, full of two and three page essays written in a very readable style. (In the title article he talks about his practice of habit of praying over food wherever he is if it is appropriate. Personally, I've always been a little on the fence with the whole praying at restaurants thing. We pray at home with Will- we sing this song that has kind of taken a life of it's own with hand drumming and what not. I'm not sure most folks would recognize this as prayer, but Will loves it. And I do, too. But in public places I'm less sure. Yes, I still want to give thanks to God for my food and for the hands that prepared it- but when I take part in praying over a meal at Juan Colorado's or wherever, I also hear Jesus word's in my head

telling us not to pray with such obvious, public displays of affection for God, wearing our religion on our sleeves as it were, but to pray in secret.) But despite my reservations, I love what Mouw writes about his practice of prayer. When his friends found out that he even prays at places like Burger King, one of them scoffs at him and says, “How can you pray at Burger King? It’s so noisy and commercial. Surely, you don’t feel very spiritual there.” And Mouw’s response is great. He tells his friend he doesn’t pray just when he feels spiritual. Indeed, if he only prays when he feels spiritual, he wouldn’t pray much at all. No, he prays because whether he’s at home, Morton’s steakhouse, or Burger King, his food is still a gift, and he will still give thanks- whether he feels like it or not.

So maybe this is why Paul writes in his own hand. Maybe he doesn’t exactly feel like it. Maybe he doesn’t even want to do it- but he takes the time anyway, because he knows it’s the right thing to do. Any of you who care for someone else, or for a pet- you know all about this. Growing up basically means you doing things not because you want to- but because it’s the right thing to do.

I think this is part of what spurs Paul to write, but I also wonder if maybe it’s more than this. I wonder if it’s more than just a sense of responsibility and habit- it feels as if there’s also a desire to make sure he gives it his best shot, pull out all the stops, so that he doesn’t leave anything left on the table. Then, if the Galatians listen- great. And if they don’t, at least Paul knows he gave it his all.

My last year in high school I have a vivid memory of one night. A strange night. I went with my friend Mitra Cambell to see *With Honors*- a movie with Brendan Frazier

and Joe Pesci. And for some reason I kept crying all the way through it, which was really weird- and honestly a little embarrassing. I mean I don't mind shedding a tear here or there, but I was really crying. Now, it wasn't the movie. If any of you have seen it, you'll know it wasn't the movie. It was something coming loose inside of me.

In the movie a young, graduate student at Harvard loses his thesis down in this basement and ends up having to deal with this bum played by Joe Pesci to get it back-page by page. Along the way Pesci becomes a kind of wise, father figure- the kind of father the young man never had.

I've shared before my difficult relationship with my dad. He was such an angry man. He left when I was 12, and never really had much to do with us after that- which was fine with me. At first I thought I could pretty much forget him- just pretend that he never really existed. But of course, we can't really do that- forget people. Especially family. They're always with us, hence the Hebrew wisdom of honoring our mother and father. Note well the commandment doesn't say like your mother or father, or even love them, or obey them- but to honor them. I think this means at the very least to make our peace with them. And so by the time I got to high school and realized I couldn't forget my dad- I gave this a try.

So, I surrounded myself with caring men, who talked to me about their own fathers, their own ways of being men in this world. I went to a men's group a few times- went to a drumming circle, read all the great books from the men's movement like Iron John and Fire in the Belly and a host of others. And all of this was so helpful in my own journey of growing into a young man, but none of this really thawed much of my hatred for my father that was frozen inside of me.

And then there was this stupid movie. This stupid movie that really wasn't all that great- except that it hit me like a ton of bricks. Watching it I just had a visceral sense that my father, as lousy as he was, he did the best that he could at the time. And while this didn't exactly make me want to seek him out and vote for him as father of the year- it did make he want to forgive him, to let him know that I was beginning to understand.

And so that night, after I said my goodbyes to Mitra, she and I never talked about it but I'm sure she was wondering, "What the heck?" After I headed home, I remember going back to my room- it was about midnight. And I had this wine bottle with a candle in it, all melted around the top of it- like in a 70's Italian restaurant. And I lit this candle, opened my windows to let the sweet, humid Texas night air in, and I got out some paper, and I wrote a letter to my father. It was probably the easiest letter in the world for me to write- the words just flowed. And I mailed it that night.

And then I waited to hear back from. I waited. And I waited, and waited, and waited some more. He never did write back. I decided to call him. I wanted to make sure he got it. Maybe the letter had gotten lost in the mail. Who knows? And so I called him. Well, he had received it. And then, in one of the weirdest conversations of my life, he just talked about what he was doing, what he was planning- he always has these huge plans. And then we hung up. The letter? I don't know if he just didn't care or didn't understand- but either way it was like water off of a duck's back to him.

I was disappointed. I was. But you know what- I wasn't crushed, I wasn't even angry, which is my normal response to him. I actually was OK with the conversation we had. And this surprised me. It's taken me a long time to figure out why, but I think the reason is this. I didn't write that letter for him- I wrote it for me. I wrote it for me- and

whether he was able to respond to it or not, well that didn't matter as much as me saying some things I needed to say. And yeah, it would have been great if he would have been able to read it and if he would have taken the chance of being a father to me- but it was enough for me to write what I did and let go some of my anger, my hatred for him.

90% of life is just showing up. Friends, show up this week. Even if you don't feel like it, show up. Do something, go somewhere with a person you care about- even if you're in a rotten mood. Say nice things- even if you don't mean it. And most of all- tell the people you care about how you really feel about them this week. Don't leave anything on the table. **Amen.**