Have you ever wrote something in anger that you regret later? I know this is kind of an obvious question to ask in the Social Media Age, because the ability to comment and discuss things in the written word has never been so available and immediate to us as it is now, meaning that when we are upset or angry about something, it is increasingly easy to pop off about it online. It used to be that if you were upset about something that you read in the news, you had to sit down and write a letter, sleep on it, because the mail had probably already come, and then send that thing off to the editor of the local news paper in the morning. Not so today! We can instantly send out all of our grievances to a host of rage-hungry followers and friends, whether that rage be directed at the injustices of national politics or at the drive thru employee who left the tomato off of our sandwich.

And with that ease of access comes the all too often experience of expressed anger that we’d like to take back. Maybe it is just me, but there has been a time or two, or three, or four, where my in the moment feelings, expressed online, are something I’d like to take back. And sharing this story may make y’all never invite me back here again, but I think of the time when a professor of mine wanted to donate a bed his family no longer needed to a seminary student in need. This professor was not on Facebook, so asked someone to post the offer on the student Facebook group. The offer had pretty specific instructions: please email the professor directly if you are interested in the bed. And of course, someone immediately commented on the post, saying that they would love the bed, not following the instructions. Now, you have to understand that my job at this time was working in the Student Services department at me school, which meant that I was the one who you would send your papers too if you wanted someone to read over them, checking for grammatical issues and making sure you cited your sources correctly. I was honed in on details and tired of students sending me assignments where they had not followed the directions. And so, I could not let this apparent not following of the the directions slide for one minute, because heaven forbid someone be wrong and remain uncorrected on the internet!

So I posted my comment, encouraging critical reading skills. It was mean, it was petty, and it was a total misread of the situation and none of my business. I instantly regretted it. I deleted my comment within a few minutes. But it was too late, the other commenter had already deleted his comment, which I took to mean that he had read my jab and gotten embarrassed. I hope he got the bed, but I do not know if he did. And now you all know one of the reasons I am no longer on Facebook!

I wonder what the Apostle Paul would have been like on Facebook. This is fun to imagine, but it is probably a good thing that we don’t have the social media feeds of the apostles. Because while the writings that we have today we confess as Holy Scripture, co-authored by the Holy Spirit, the
apostles’ social media posts would reflect their fallen human nature, just as all of our feeds show our weaknesses.

But I still would like to see Paul’s witty one liners though, because the man had a way with words! Can you imagine the comment section where Peter and Paul duke it out over how to include Gentiles in the Church? That would be some entertaining reading!

Just like all of us, Paul could get angry, that’s for sure. And while we are mercifully spared the smaller less important things that angered him in his life, the things we see in the Scriptures, especially from our reading from the book of Galatians today, give us a window into the sorts of things that God gets fired up about, the sorts of things that God cares about.

I will not be the first or the last preacher to tell you that the letter to the Galatians is widely known as Paul’s “angry” letter. Note for example how Paul handles the beginning of this particular letter. Turn over and take a look at Galatians 1. One of the distinctive things about the formula for a Pauline letter is that he has a brief greeting followed almost always by a prayer of thanksgiving, which is Paul’s way of thanking God for all that is going well in the Church to which he is writing. It is a good way to get in the good graces of his audience, noting the ways in which they are being faithful to the Gospel.

So, let’s turn to the beginning of Paul’s letter to the Galatians... What do we have?

Beginning n verse 3 of chapter 1:
“3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, 4 who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, 5 to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen. 6 I am astonished that you called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel…” (ESV)

Huh, what happened to the complimentary thanksgiving prayer? Paul goes right from hello, to I am astonished. Can you imagine that, someone comes over to your house and you go right from “Hello, welcome to my house,” to “I am astonished that you would wear that to dinner”?

Paul has broken from his typical thanksgiving pattern, so we would do well to ask ourselves why. The next section up until our reading for today gives us a good idea of why Paul is upset with the Galatians. It goes right back to his abrupt greeting - I am astonished. What is astonishing to Paul is that he Galatians, using Paul’s words here, have deserted the Gospel that he had preached to them in favor of a pseudo Christian message: that they, Galatians who were gentiles, had to become Jews by their men becoming circumcised in order for them to become Christians. And one thing we know about the Apostle Paul from the book of Acts and from this first chapter of Galatians is that he considered it his specific mission to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles, so I am sure you can imagine the conflict that this particular issue raises within Paul. He had fought hard to expand the Early Church’s view of who was allowed in to the way of following Jesus, you can read more about it in the Council of Jerusalem portions of the book of Acts, a deliberation that
had resulted in the decision that Gentiles did not have to become Jews in order to become Christians. The full observance of the law, including the practice of circumcision and the dietary regulations, were not required of non-Jewish followers of Jesus.

But whoever had gotten to the Galatians after Paul had left was telling them a different story, and they bought it. At least, we can assume they bought it enough for word to get back to Paul that the Church he had visited was practicing the Law to a degree that was not necessary and treating that practice of the Law as necessary for their salvation.

And this is a problem for Paul on two counts, because, first off, this puts an undue burden on the non-Jews who are hearing the Gospel and coming to faith in Christ. Secondly, it sets up this idea that somehow it is our works as Christians that justify us. Paul writes in the second chapter of Galatians:

“15 We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; 16 yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.”

Paul goes on to the real crux of his argument in verse 21: “I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.”

And this is why Paul is angry, this is why he calls the relying on works or a specific culture a different gospel. What is necessary for salvation is the grace of God in Christ, to shift from that to a certain set of works is to follow a different gospel.

Paul is so distressed that you can almost hear the strain in his voice as he writes of the beginning of chapter 3: “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?”

And so begins the chapter that our reading for today comes from. Paul is agitated and advocating for the purity of the Gospel based in the work of Christ and not in our own work. So we need to hear the gravity of his words at the end of the chapter, assuring the Galatians of their identity in Christ:

“in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. 27 For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

The Galatians were concerned about what you had to do to become part of the Jesus club. Someone had come along and told them that they, non-Jews, had to become Jews. But the corrective Paul brings here is this: the Gospel is for everyone. Everyone who has been baptized, who has put on Christ in Paul’s words, is in Christ, regardless of culture, race, gender, or social class. The Gospel tears down barriers where people try to build them up.
One of the more ugly side effects of a theology of justification by works is that it has a tendency to cause us fallen humans to begin to draw the lines of who is in and who is out. If we’re not careful, those questions start to become more important to us than our continual pursuit of Jesus. It can be gratifying to put up borders, to be assured of ourselves that we are the ones that have it right. And of course we take orthodoxy seriously; of course we must be faithful to the whole Gospel; of course we must call what is true, true and what is a lie, a lie. These things are not in question. But when we forget that we aren’t the ones who declare who’s in and who’s out, we are in danger of proclaiming a gospel based upon works, a gospel not of Jesus Christ, a gospel that is limited in its scope.

Sometimes we want to leave people out because they make us uncomfortable, because they don’t quite fit in with the way we do things. Sometimes we have a tendency to leave people out because of our own biases. Sometimes we want to leave people out because they have bad theology! But my own journey is a testament to the fact that God’s grace is sufficient to overcome my bad theology.

When we believe in a gospel based on works, our vision is narrowed when it comes to who we believe is worthy of God’s grace. To deny the strength and the breadth of God’s love in this way is to preach a different gospel. It is for us to be in the same place as the teachers who questioned Jesus... who is my neighbor, really? Because inherent in that question is the people we have in mind that we’ve already written off the ones we assume are out of God’s reach, and are therefore not worthy of our love and attention. If the Gospel is for my neighbor, then that means that the scope of the Gospel extends to my enemy.

Brittany and I once had a neighbor who may have been the worst neighbor I the history of neighbors. I’ll put it to you this way: we had some blackberry bushes on the edge of our parking area that stopped producing fruit when she moved in and started again after she moved out. This was the neighbor that lived in seminary on campus housing, but looked at me like I had asked if she had the plague when I asked her if she was a student. There was the music and partying late at night while we were trying to study or sleep and the hogging of the walk ways with her chairs. We had another friend who was her roommate for a while, really sweet girl, but chose to move out, at least in part based on her behavior. Anyway, it was not an ideal situation.

And so I wrote her off. If she wasn’t going to make any effort, then neither was I. I stopped saying hello, and kept reactions to a minimum. I had decided that she was a jerk and I didn’t want anything to do with her.

Cut to one morning when I was late for work. I rush out the door to get into my car. Her car is next to mine, hood up, jumper cables laying out. She is inside. I know what this means. She needs help. She needs someone to jump start her battery so her car can start. I look up and down our line of apartments, hoping someone else can be the one to help, but there are no other cars, just hers and mine. But I’m late, I reason. If she wanted my help, she would have asked for it. So I drive off. I leave her there. And as I am backing away, I see her looking at me through her kitchen window. It turns out that I was the jerk.
When we play favorites, when we appoint ourselves as the ones who determine where God’s grace ends, we are surrendering to another gospel, a gospel of works, a gospel that greatly angered the Apostle Paul. We humans are good at drawing lines, it helps us to understand ourselves and our surroundings. But when we attempt to draw lines with God’s love, we seek to round up the uncontainable, we make the gospel about us. If we stopped drawing the limits, and let God’s word and love speak for themselves, the faith will remain protected and we might just be surprised what we see. It would be a witness of unity to an increasingly divided world. A picture of what radical love looks like. A place where there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

If you think this sounds like hard work, declaring the universality of God’s grace available to everyone, while maintaining the particularity of orthodox Christian faith, finding unity in diversity in a kingdom that spans all races and cultures, if you think that sounds difficult, I’d have to agree with you.

In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus speaks of the difficulty of following him, that we must daily carry our cross. To build a Church where there is no Jew or Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, this means to embrace adversity and yes, to deny ourselves. But in doing so, let us rejoice in the fact that we are following the one who loved us and gave himself up for us, the Son, who with the Father and Spirit is worshipped and glorified, now and forever, Amen.