***Dealing with our Resentments***

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on June 1, 2025*

*based on Galatians 1:13-24*

I’m going to say a word and I want you to imagine a face that goes with it. The word is … *bitter.* Got it?

Imagine the face of a farmer in northern Oklahoma riding a mortgaged tractor, burning gasoline purchased on a credit card that he hasn’t paid off in years. He’s plowing land his father leased decades before, and neither he, nor his dead father, have ever made a dime on the gamble.

He produces corn, soybeans and wheat, depending on the year, and looming tariffs are already costing him because the cost of fertilizer is rising quickly and he has no idea if he can sell his products internationally which is imperative for his survival. But he keeps on farming, because that’s all he knows to do, and he feels he’s too old to try anything new. Bitter. Think of a face like that.

I also see the face of a woman. She’s 47. She is sitting alone in a cemetery under a forest green canopy furnished by the cemetery – she’s waiting for the pastor of the church that her mother went to for years, but which she, the daughter, never attended because she lives a thousand miles away. Her sister lives down the road from her mother, but she’s not there, and none of the three have spoken a word in a decade. Not since “Dad” died in 2015. Bitter.

I see the face of a man who runs a hardware store in a small town in Nebraska. No one is in the store at the moment. The store has been his for a dozen years. It’s been an important part of the small town for even longer. A year before this, plans for a WalMart Superstore were announced for the larger town 15 miles to the west.

Now, his friends told him they would continue to support his little store at that time. His friends all said, “Hang in there. We need you. We won’t forget you.” But he knows full well they all shop at the WalMart when they make the drive to the larger town for doctoring and the like. Bitter.

I also see the face of a young man. He got his four-year degree, two summers ago. His college debt is over $75,000. He had decided that he wanted to teach. He said money wasn’t a huge factor for happiness for him. He wanted to make a difference in young people’s lives, but all he has gotten is substitute teaching jobs so far, and it’s wearing on him.

He’d move to a place where there are more jobs, except his mother needs looking after. His brother made the move to another town years before. That brother could afford to help her, but he doesn’t. And the young man has just been turned down for a local full-time teaching job with medical benefits; benefits he really needs. Bitter.

Okay, let me ask you to imagine one more face. The face of a man named Saul. Saul of Tarsus. Now we call him Paul, or the apostle Paul, but he used to go by his Jewish name, Saul. He was young, intelligent, committed to his Jewish faith. He was the top of his class in Hebrew school.

While he pursued his convictions and studies, there began a new movement growing up within Judaism; one of many new groups – this one called, “Followers of the Nazarene,” an itinerant rabbi named Jesus.

These followers of the Nazarene seem, at first, to pose no threat. They are just one of many new religious groups dotting the landscape during a time of foment in the Jewish sector of the Roman empire.

This isn’t a bit unusual. Judaism had long been a broadly liberal religion. It tolerated a number of groups under the umbrella of their faith – groups like the Sadducees for instance, and the Pharisees who were a reform group, and the Essenes, and various zealot communities. Why not tolerate this group of Nazarenes? As long as they respect the temple in Jerusalem and what it stands for, what could be the problem?

Well, these “Nazarenes” are beginning to say that their sect is open to people *outside* the traditional boundaries of Judaism. It’s not just for Jews, they say. No, it is open to anyone who is interested in following the teachings of the man from Nazareth; the man with the really big heart.

Paul has heard that both men and women from the sect are getting a wide following, and they are saying things that even the most liberal among adherents of Judaism find questionable, maybe unthinkable. They are saying that it doesn’t matter if you are born a Jew or not. It means nothing.

Saul asks, “What do they mean by that? Are they saying that a thousand years of mistreatment and exile of Jews struggling in a polytheistic world to keep their faith alive means nothing?

It would be like being born an only child. And when you are seventeen years old, your parents tell you they are adopting a seventeen-year-old boy to be your brother. Now when you were three you asked for a little brother – you wanted a playmate -- back then. But not now – not when you are about to launch into the adult world.

Worse, one morning your father says, “I’ve spoken to our lawyer, and I am drawing up papers. I will be leaving the family business to you and your brother, as well. You will be equal partners.”

How are you going to feel about that? You’re going to say, “Huh! Where was this new brother of mine when I was mowing the lawn all those years? Where was he when I comforted my mother when my parents separated for six months when I was fourteen?”

Are you going to congratulate your brother on your father’s generosity?” Probably not.

So, imagine how Saul the Pharisee feels. Generation after generation of Jews have worshipped as the people of God, and now this man from the two-bit town of Nazareth comes along and none of this matters anymore? Jews and Gentiles are now seen as equals in the eyes of the God you have worshipped all your life.

Saul must ask himself what all those years of study he’d done were worth. And so, as a Pharisee, and a leader among them, he resolves to crush this new movement.

In the name of the God he has worshipped as a faithful Jew all his life, he will give his life to this cause of persecution. He will stamp this blight on the faith out; the quicker the better.

Yes, but there is a problem here. Saul knows the scriptures, and he knows that they are not black and white when it comes to who God loves.

Saul knows the book of Ruth, for instance, that teaches that a non-Jew, even a non-Jew from Moab, the ancient enemy of the Jews, can be considered “righteous.”

She was, in fact, so honored by God that tradition deemed her the grandmother of King David.

Yes, and Saul also knows the story of Jonah, where even the supreme enemy of the Jewish people, the Assyrians, are found worthy of rescue, and adoption.

These are ideas Saul has puzzled over in his studies. In fact, they reminded him once, when he felt unworthy, that God loves the undeserving; that God finds all human’s to be God’s children.

Yes, but equally? It’s a difficult thing. Saul sees the world changing, changing in ways he doesn’t like. The old ways are fading, new races and peoples who used to be dismissed outright are now finding acceptance, and their rights are even being championed by some. This is an old old conundrum, but you and I both know that it is still with us. Right?

I mean, we are where we are in this country today because a critical mass of people who were as bitter about this kind of change as Saul was, two thousand years ago, have been baited for nearly three decades now by FOX News, and the Republican Party has weaponized them.

They are on the whole, very good, hard working, faithful people who see that the world is changing and it makes them fearful and sad, and nostalgic for an earlier time; and resentful, and yes . . . bitter.

Do they want to be bitter? No, and, well, yes. Sometimes white hot anger reminds you that you are alive. But, like I said, they don’t like the way things seem to be going and they have been persuaded that undeserving people have cut in front of them in the line and It makes them cranky and hard to get along with.

This is Saul’s dilemma. He’s like an old man in a young man’s body, and to believe what he believes in a world going in the opposite direction – well, he figures that he is going to have to spend the last half of his life in bitter protest. That’s what he makes his mind up to do, in fact, when he decides he will be a persecutor of Christians.

Resentment and bitterness; they do awful things to people’s hearts. They turn previously lovely upstanding people into characters their children don’t recognize anymore. It happens every day.

So what do we do, these things being the case?

Well, what I’m thinking this Sunday morning is that holding people in contempt as Saul held the early Christian movement, is not sustainable, as Saul himself found out. That’s what I’ve been trying to help us understand about the resentments that have been driving the divisions among us.

And look, if we dare look in a mirror maybe we can see that we on the left of this great divide have suddenly become the resentful party in this struggle. We are becoming the bitter ones. What happened to all the progress we worked so hard for 60 years to make? Is it gone forever? What about the sacrifices of Dr. King, and Rosa Parks, and Stonewall, and Me-Too, and so many others?

We might as well start wearing blue colored hats that say, “Make America Great Again.” Sixty years of liberal successes, winning victory after victory in civil rights, women’s rights, gay rights.

Part of what I want to do in some of these upcoming summer Sundays will be to look at this closely; examine the world and also our own hearts.

Let me leave this all right here, though this Sunday having confessed my own resentments, my own resemblance to angry Saul who in time became the apostle Paul.

I don’t want to die cynical and bitter. I’m dedicated to finding a different path.

Amen