

The Assertive Christian
Galatians 6:1-10
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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One of the myths about Christianity is it gives weak and helpless people permission to be weak and helpless people. For instance you've heard this accusation: "**Oh, Christians use their religion as a crutch!**" the implication being Christianity is an escape hatch from the real problems of the real world.

And yet, your own personal experiences and your knowledge of what the scriptures teach speak loud and clear that Christianity turns weak people into men and women of strength and courage.

I don't mean to say we're perfect. Christians have faults. And yet, we have access to the power of life and grace that gives us the opportunity to be truly assertive in the way we live our lives.

What do I mean by assertive? Let's go to the dictionary.

"Assertive: inclined to express oneself positively and boldly, to affirm from the Latin: to join oneself." Being assertive means being positive and bold. Nothing wrong with that. Ah, some will say, "But aren't you Christians supposed to be meek and mild? How can you be bold and assertive and still be a Christian?" To answer these questions let's look to Jesus himself, for when we observe Jesus' life we get a clear picture of what Christianity is all about. As Harry Emerson Fosdick once pointed out, "Christ himself is Christianity." That is to say, Jesus of Nazareth was the personification of healthy, assertive living.

That doesn't mean Jesus was rude, bossy, obnoxious, and power-hungry. These negative characteristics are the mark of the aggressive person. Note the difference. Aggressive means being hostile and quarrelsome. Think of the many confrontations forced on Jesus in the gospels and you realize Jesus' adversaries were the aggressive ones. And, as always is the case, people who act aggressively do so from a position of weakness. When you are afraid feeling trapped and insecure that's when you are prone to lash out.

How did Jesus respond to aggression? He never got in a screaming match with anybody. He didn't have to. Instead, Jesus simply embraced the truth and stood his ground. Yes he was meek and mild, humble and loving, spending his life giving himself away. But he accomplished these things from a position of strength. How? Being the Son of God, Jesus had the perfect personality, fully integrated through his special intimate relationship with God the Father. Jesus was always in balance. Yes, he could have been tempted to lose that balance, but he didn't! But that doesn't mean Jesus never got angry at stupidity or injustice.

Remember the time Jesus drove the money changers out of the temple with a whip? Jesus was angry at the way those in authority abused the system for their own selfish ends; angry, but never out of control.

How about the time Jesus used shock treatment to shake the Pharisees out of their blinders? "**Woe to you, you hypocrites!**" Again, Jesus was not name calling for the sake of name calling. Instead, he was telling the truth.

But Jesus' assertive behavior wasn't just confined to confrontations with adversaries. Look at the way he related to everybody, always direct, bold and positive and always loving and graceful. For instance, when Jesus healed the man at the pool of Bethesda he was assertive. **"Do you want to get well?"** Jesus asked this question forcing the man to himself be assertive so he could participate in his own healing.

At the same time Jesus was assertive in the way he dealt with people who wanted to follow him.

Remember the would be follower who proclaimed, **"I will follow you wherever you go."** Whereupon Jesus replied, **"Foxes have holes, birds have their nests, but the son of man has no place to lay his head."** Then there's that other story of the rich young ruler who asked, **"What must I do to acquire eternal life?"** Mark tells us, **"Jesus looked straight at him with love and said, 'Sell all you have, give the money to the poor, and then follow me.'"** Jesus was honest and direct using assertive love so that the young man could experience that same love.

The gospels are full of stories of Jesus' assertive life-style, but let me include this last example. Jesus was assertive in the way he died. Never forget this, Jesus was not a victim of circumstances. He didn't go to the cross kicking and screaming, begging for mercy. Instead, Jesus allowed it to happen. Paradoxically, on the day he was crucified, only Jesus was in complete control of himself. All the others, from Pilate, to the High Priests, to the people in the crowds lashed out aggressively. Jesus alone demonstrated assertive love, especially when he said from the cross, **"Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."**

Yes, Christ was an assertive personality, and through Christ we too are empowered to be bold and positive in the way we treat each other and ourselves. Through Christ we are empowered to speak and live the truth in love.

Which now brings us to this morning's text taken from Galatians 6:1-10. **"If anyone is overtaken in any trespass you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness."** This is a potentially uncomfortable text because all of us are given the responsibility of correcting one another. How many of us feel comfortable doing that? Our contemporary culture conditions us to overlook other people's indiscretions. We don't want to be accused of being self-righteous busy bodies. At the same time we don't want to harm our friendships, so in the words of Ann Landers, "MYOB," mind your own business. But doesn't that go against the grain of the gospel message?

In my lifetime, one of the standouts for assertive living was Martin Luther King, whose role model for ministry was none other than Jesus of Nazareth. We tend to lionize King today, but during his career as a civil rights leader he was aggressively attacked on a regular basis. However, the public record shows he never lashed out against his adversaries, nor did he ever incite his community to violence against the segregationists. Instead he preached the assertive response because he realized when you attempt to dehumanize the other, you only dehumanize yourself. Martin Luther King is exhibit A for the bold, positive, assertive lifestyle. And the good news is Jesus isn't the only one who could pull it off, we all can, if we choose to.

As Christian disciples, we are empowered to live assertively. God enables us to be positive and bold whenever we witness injustice, whenever we see someone trying to dehumanize someone else, we can answer the call to stand up and speak the truth in love; and don't worry about what you'll say. God will give you the right words.

Listen again to Gene Peterson's translation of Galatians 6:1. **"Live creatively friends. If someone falls into sin, forgivingly restore him, saving your critical comments for yourself."**

As I said earlier, Jesus lived assertively; he was bold and positive in the way he treated others. Despite the Sunday School image of being meek and mild, the Gospels reveal Jesus was no pushover. He willingly spent his life giving himself away and he did all these things from a position of strength.

Certainly whenever you give constructive criticism you take a risk. The other person just might get angry. But if we, like Jesus, are assertive, and love the way he loved and demonstrate we have each other's best interest at heart, then with God's help, real ministry takes place. And, if we do it right, the way Jesus would do it, those who are in spiritual danger are invited to move towards restoration and spiritual wholeness. Everybody wins, because in the end the whole Christian Community is blessed as the eternal bonds that hold us together are forged stronger.

Assertive love, a personality trait of Jesus and for us, a gift from God that helps us grow together as disciples of Christ. For you see, "Christ himself, is Christianity." We allow Christ to form and reform us, then his presence spills out from us, into each other that bold, assertive love will be hallmarks of our lives.

Let us pray!