

“One God, One People”; Gal 3:26-29
 First Presbyterian Church of Salt Lake City
 Rev. Jamie White; October 1, 2023

There was once a middle school history class that was studying world religions. The teacher gave her pupils an assignment to bring an item from home that represented their religion and to share it with the class. On presentation day, the first kid got up and said, “I’m Benjamin, I’m Jewish, and this is a star of David.” Next, a girl stood and said, “I’m Mary, and I’m a Roman Catholic and this is a rosary, we use it to pray.” Finally, the last child stood and said, “I’m Max and I’m Baptist, and this is a casserole!”

There are certain things that distinguish us from others, that show that we belong to a certain group. That can be based on any number of things: what kind of church we go to, or our college alma mater, or even the kind of car we drive. We’re all different, so it’s no wonder we have all sorts of ways to distinguish those differences. And that can be all well and good, so long as we hold all these distinguishing differences as lesser identities compared to the ultimate one we share in Christ. That is the point Paul is trying to make in the book of Galatians.

Perhaps more than any of Paul’s other letters, Galatians stands out as a manifesto of freedom for the church, as these new Christians are learning to exercise their new identity as being what Paul calls “In-Christ.” In Galatia, there had been sharp dividing lines between people for all sorts of things... religion, gender, ethnicity, social class, profession, etc. You name it and folks were defined and segregated by these various identity markers. But Paul is explaining here that once these Galatians embraced the way of Jesus, all those other identity markers, simply no longer define them like they used to. Being found in Christ is who they really are now.

But in this church, there were some folks that didn’t appreciate this newfound freedom and equality of identity. They much preferred the old, clean lines to help them understand who was in and who was out. And in their context, the more Jewish you were, the more “in” you were. So, these Jewish Christians were going to great lengths to convince all the pagan gentile Christians, that they were going to need to become Jewish if they wanted to be included in salvation. To really be “in” they need to follow the Jewish Law; everything from dietary laws to getting all their men and boys circumcised.

When Paul finds out this is going on, he writes a strongly worded letter to correct what he calls an absolute perversion of the gospel. He corrects them and writes, **“In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus! If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”**

Paul declares here, all the previous identity markers, they simply no longer matter. In fact, to make his point abundantly clear, he namedrops Abraham here, the father of the Jewish faith. Because of what Christ has done, any and all people, no matter how gentile or pagan, no matter their gender or social status, they have all become the seed of Abraham too. In Christ, everyone is “in.” Everyone is an heir according to the promise, a child of God.

Paul is making the point that our identity in Christ matters more than anything else that might define us. Now to be clear, what used to differentiate us doesn’t go away, but it simply does not hold the kind of power it used to. When we say that Christ has abolished all distinctions, we don’t mean they

no longer exist; we mean that they no longer create any barriers to fellowship, or to unity, or to equality. As one writer put it, “the ground is level at the foot of the cross.” Everyone who wants to be “in” is “in.” Jesus told his disciples, **“The kingdom of God is like a net thrown into the sea that gathers in fish of every kind.”** (Matthew 13:47) Paul puts it this way, **“From now on, we regard no one from a human point of view... if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”** -2 Cor 5:16-17

For Paul, the differences between us are nothing compared to the power of Christ in us. But like the Galatian church, we will really struggle to hold onto this. Divisions in our world and even among Christians over race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual identity, and theological disagreements of every kind are no less threatening today than they were in Paul’s day. We too, so easily cast aside our identity “In Christ”... and choose to separate ourselves into categories of us and them, in and out. Mother Teresa diagnosed the world’s ills correctly when she suggested that **“the biggest problem of our world is that we’ve somehow forgotten that we belong to each other.”** So how do we stand against forgetting that? How do we image together a circle of God’s love and then imagine that no one stands outside of that circle? How do we dismantle all the barriers that exclude the “other”?

To begin with, we must **stand against tribalism**. Humans are hard-wired to be tribal. Millennia of evolution has taught us to trust our own people and to mistrust strangers. When we are afraid, we tend to look for scapegoats and enemies. We may see the “other” as a threat to our safety or security and begin to dehumanize them. Once you have begun to dehumanize someone there is now a license to treat them badly, to hate them, perhaps even kill them. We have too often seen this dehumanization of the “other” in the persecution and slaughter of minority groups throughout history in our world. We are seeing it now in the dehumanization of Christians in Pakistan, of refugees and migrants here the United States, and of Ukrainians being killed by their Russian neighbors. The world is desperate for Christians, who can look beyond the tribal human distinctions of “not our kind” to find the common humanity that resides in all God’s children.

Next, **we refuse to exclude** those who are different from us. Our tribalism tends to create social rules of exclusion. We probably feel pretty far removed from Paul’s arguments against using the Jewish law to exclude folks, but let’s think about the kind of exclusionary rules we operate on, even subconsciously. They may not be written rules, but subtle social indicators that tell us who is acceptable and who isn’t, who is really welcome and who is not. Let’s make this personal, shall we? We say here at First Pres, and I hope we mean it, that everyone is welcome here. But is that completely true for you? Or are there certain kinds of people that if you were honest, you’d prefer not to walk through our doors? It’s a good question for us to think long and hard about, even if it might offend us.

You know when Paul told this Galatian church that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, they didn’t want to hear that. One biblical scholar joked, that in this single verse, Paul managed to offend everybody. We’re no longer hung up on who’s Jewish or Greek anymore, but we’ve got our own hang ups.

Amid our own complex immigration controversies, what if Paul had said “there is neither US born nor illegal immigrant.” In a society dramatically divided by income, “there is neither wealthy, nor working class, nor those of welfare.” In a society polarized by race, “there is neither people of color nor people of no color.” In a culture fraught with sexual confusion, “there is neither gay nor straight nor trans nor anything else.” In a season of political elections, “there is neither democrat, nor republican, nor independent.” In our own valley ripe with religious prejudice, “there is neither evangelical, nor

progressive, nor latter day saint, nor even presbyterian.” ALL are one in Christ. You might be starting to see how offensive and earth shattering this “In Christ” identity really is. In Christ there is no room for exclusion.

In Christ, we are all one family, and we are called to dismantle any and all humanly created barriers that lead to the marginalization and exclusion of other children of God. We are never to prohibit anyone from the good news of the gospel, and to receiving a full and complete welcome into God’s family. If we’re excluding folks, we’ve lost sight of the gospel. Author Lisa Sharon Harper puts it this way, **“If the gospel is not good news for all people, well, then it’s not good news for anybody. Let me put it even more strongly. If the gospel isn’t good news for all people, then it is not the gospel.”** -Lisa Sharon Harper

Now friends, let’s not pretend this is easy. We also need to remember that people grow up in Christ at different rates, we don’t all start from the same place, so we need to be compassionate and graceful toward those who might still stuck in whatever today’s version of the Law might be for them. Sometimes that tribalism or prejudice is buried pretty deep within us. None of us got to where we are today overnight. None of us have been able to change our deeply held beliefs simply by snapping our fingers. So, we have patience for one another as we learn to love others more fully.

Our job is to keep showing up and trusting that God is at work. We stay, even when we’re uncomfortable with the other folks in the room. We come to the table alongside folks with whom we disagree. We just keep showing up. Because here’s the truth: It’s impossible for human beings to dehumanize people they know. Human beings can’t sustain that. So, when we keep showing up, we find ourselves getting to know the folks that look different than us, that think and vote differently than we do... we end up having opportunities to hear each other’s point of view and learn from one another... and pretty soon we discover, not only have stopped excluding one another, but even more, despite our differences, we’ve somehow become friends.

Father Gregory Boyle founded the largest gang intervention and rehabilitation program in the world, Homeboy Industries. There enemies from rival gangs are invited to work alongside each other, which Boyle says, “is always dicey at first.” He says that the homies come in looking for a job and he’ll say, “We have an opening in the bakery, but you’ve got to work with X, Y, and Z” as he rattles off the names of enemies. The homie always say the same thing, “I’ll work with them, but I’m not going to talk to them.”

Boyle tells the story of young homie, 19 years-old, a little guy, everyone called Youngster. He offered Youngster a job and on his first day introduced him to his new 30 coworkers, many of them rivals and enemies. Then Boyle says was blown away when Youngster went around shaking hands with each one, thinking “well this is off to a good start.”

But eventually Youngster got to the last guy, a guy named Puppet. When Puppet and Youngster stood near each other everything became tense; and they begin to mumble things under their breath, refused to look at each other, and they definitely didn’t shake hands. Later on, Boyle learned that there was a hatred that was so deep and personal, and that beyond which, neither of them believed they’d ever get over. But they both needed a job and so they figured out how to work together.

But about six months later, Puppet left his house to go to a corner store to buy some groceries. On his walk home he was suddenly and unexpectedly surrounded by ten members of a rival gang. Ten

against one. And they beat him badly. While he was lying on the ground, they just kept kicking his head, until he lay there lifeless. Somebody found him and took him to the Hospital, where he was declared officially brain dead. But they had to keep him connected to machines for 48 hours, to ensure there was truly no brain activity.

This waiting period allowed Puppet's family and friends to gather to say their goodbyes to this young man who had been so badly beaten that he was nearly unrecognizable. As the waiting period ended, Father Boyle gave him a blessing and anointed his head with oil. Puppet was disconnected from life support and buried a few days later.

But in that first 24 hours, while Puppet was lying in the hospital, Boyle said he got a phone call late at night from Youngster, Puppet's coworker. Youngster said to him, "Hey, that's really messed up what happened to Puppet." And then with a certain kind of eagerness even, he went on, "Is there anything that I can do? Can I give him my blood?" And they both fell silent under the weight of it all. Until finally Youngster broke the silence, choking back tears and said, "He was not my enemy. He was my friend."

Boyle says that this is what happens every time rival gang members work alongside each other. Every time, without exception, enemies become friends. Boyle writes, **"It shouldn't surprise us that God's own dream come true for us—that we be one—just happens to be our own deepest longing for ourselves. For it turns out its mutual."**

It does not really matter what it is that threatens to divide us, we are all one in Christ. This is what we were made for, this is what ought to be the most obvious marker of our Christian faith. It really is that simple. Remember, Jesus said that our faith boils down to two commands; Love God with all we are and love our neighbors as we love ourselves. This is how people will know we're Christ's disciples, by our love. I love how Dr. Barbara Brown Taylor applies this law of love: **"The only clear line I draw these days is this: When my religion tries to come between me and my neighbor, I will choose my neighbor. Jesus never commanded me to love my religion."**

I am convinced that this is the church's greatest witness: to show our fractured and polarized world how people can live in loving community together, despite our differences. It's not about loving our religion; it's about loving our neighbor. Jesus has called to be one, and in our oneness lies our strength; in our oneness will the world see the difference in us—through our love will the world see the love and grace of Christ. Father Gregory Boyle puts this beautifully when he says, **"We're called to this exquisite mutuality where we obliterate once and for all the illusion that we're separate... to bridge any kind of distance that might exist between us and anybody else. To declare with our very life that there is no us and them, there is only us."** Amen.