

“One in Christ Jesus”

Valley Presbyterian Church – June 19, 2022

2nd Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 42:1-6a

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Galatians 3:32-29

There is story recorded in the book of Acts where the Apostle Paul – traveling with his fellow missionary Silas in Philippi – encounters a slave girl who is possessed by a divining spirit. When Paul calls this spirit to come out of her, the girl’s owners grow angry, because she is now unable to make them money. Paul and Silas are thrown in jail for being a disturbance and – on top of that – for being Jews. That night, an earthquake shakes the prison doors open. The next day, when Paul tells the magistrate that he – not only a Jew but also a Roman citizen – has suffered beatings and imprisonment, Paul and Silas are given apologies and asked to leave the city.

Paul understood – because he, himself, possessed – multiple identities. Paul was a Jew, but also a Roman citizen. He was a highly educated teacher of the Law yet earned his living by making tents. He had grown up an observant keeper of this Law, but now traveled the ancient world, preaching the Christian gospel of grace. Though never a slave, Paul had been jailed and beaten multiple times.

Each of us also know and possess multiple identities. We are diverse in age and gender, by the jobs we do, the languages we speak and the faith we practice. If we are Americans, our ancestors likely at some point came from another land. Some of these identities we proudly claim and celebrate; some are markers by which others may judge or mistreat us.

So, when Paul describes the Law as being like a disciplinarian, he likely understands this from personal experience. In the ancient world, the disciplinarian was usually a servant who, in wealthy families, was put in charge of the children when they were outside of school; they played the role of tutor, and protector. This was a temporary role, only necessary until the child was old enough to care for

themselves and be responsible for their own studies.¹ It is possible that Paul had been watched and tutored by such a disciplinarian when he was a child.

Yet, Paul – a keeper of the Jewish Law – says that the role of the Law for followers of Christ, like that of the disciplinarian for a child, is finite. Until we are baptized in Christ, when we receive this good news and live by faith, we are subject to the Law; it is a good and necessary teacher. But the Law does not have the power to transform us, to clothe us in this new identity that is beyond ourselves and our doing. Only God, in Christ, can give that to us.

And when we are clothed in Christ, then the divisions that separate us fall away. We do not lose our previous identities; rather, a radical change in relative status takes place. Paul offers three pairs of identity markers to show that what was uneven has become leveled, what had been chasms were now bridged: no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male and female; but, instead, all one in Christ Jesus.

Now, Paul was not some grand social reformer. He was a man of his day; and thus we find within his epistles a number of comments and recommendations that, in our present day, make us cringe. For example, he says that men are to be head of the household as Christ is head of the church; Paul writes that women need to keep their heads covered and remain silent in church; and he falls woefully short in condemning slavery or supporting marriage equality.

Many of these statements are reflections of the society in which Paul lived; they make sense in an ancient context but not our own. It's not unlike the many examples of polygamy or animal sacrifice we see in other parts of the Bible. At one time, those things were acceptable, but we live in a vastly different time.

But, what Paul makes clear here, in this letter to the Galatians, is that everyone who is in Christ – who shares this common identity as God's chosen and beloved children – is welcomed, accepted, and united. Within the community of faith, there will be neither condemnation nor favoritism based on nationality or ethnicity, no masters and servants, no system of patriarchy. All are freed by God and before God; transformed into equal members of a new community based on inclusion and mutual respect.²

¹ Elisabeth Johnson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

² Alicia Vargas from *WorkingPreacher.com*

How sad it is, then, that two of our modern-day sister Christian denominations – the United Methodist Church and the Christian Reformed Church – are right now in the midst of painful schisms due to divisions over the acceptance of members and ministers who identify as something other than heterosexual. Ordained clergy, sometimes after decades, are now being asked to choose allegiance either to their vocation or to their spouse. Parents whose children have been baptized in Christ now wonder if they will be one day be told – based on who they love - that they are no longer welcome in the church.

In all corners of the Christian church, there are instances where we fall short of Paul’s vision of radical inclusion. Issues such as ethnic diversity, gender pay equality, and disability inclusion continue to be challenges within the body of Christ. Our denomination, Presbytery, and congregation have vowed to focus on ecclesial and social equality in what is called the Matthew 25 Initiative: seeking to eradicate systemic poverty and dismantle structural racism. We long for the day when everyone has status, resource and opportunity.

Paul believed that, in Christ, our differences that previously divided us now connect us. For, whether we are male or female, we share a common identity as God’s beloved child. No matter our occupation or rung on the ladder of power, we are each a gifted member of the body. Regardless of where we were born or grew up or now claim as our home, we were made by the same creator; our bodies and minds each formed with unique beauty.³

Yet, we live in a world that is full of competing binaries: east or west, red or blue, urban or rural. We create our own distinctions between what is known or familiar and that which is novel or not yet understood. Why do we need new voting methods when, in the past, we went to the polls? Why new cashless payments when we’re familiar with using bills and coins? Why new gender identifiers like “they/them” instead of “her” or “him?” Why add new federal holidays like today’s Juneteenth?

Paul is effectively saying, here in Galatians, that in the future God imagines for us – and which God has already begun – there will be no differentiating identities to tear us apart. Our discipleship, as we gather together in Christ, is to build one another up, to nurture and to unite. We cannot do that by appealing to differences, or by inciting division, as so many of today’s politicians are doing. To

³ Richard Swanson from *A Provocation*

do so is to be enslaved to a world that is passing away, rather than true discipleship to Christ.⁴

This week, we gather for “Compassion Camp” – bringing together children, youth, and adults – for four days of story-telling and music, creative motion and expression focused on seeing, feeling and acting on the emotions of others. If we are to show compassion – we will learn – it first is necessary to experience empathy. We must view others as our neighbors, as members of the same community, in a shared humanity. We cannot love them, nor love ourselves, until there is true welcome, acceptance, and inclusion.

All who have been baptized into Christ are clothed with him, wrapped up in him, and incorporated into him so that Christ becomes one’s primary identity marker.⁵ Paul invites us to put on the garments of acceptance and inclusion; and to claim an identity as children of God who treat everyone as sisters and brothers.

Our differences in ethnicity, age, gender, and socio-economic status will not magically disappear, of course. But Paul declares them to be irrelevant in the body of Christ. They are no longer first among that which makes us who we are. For, to be baptized into Christ means that our value, our identity is found in Christ.

It may not be like the disciplinarian who watches over us and tells us what to do and when. No, the Law – what we do or fail to do – will not save us, it cannot define us. By grace, we have faith. In Christ, we all become one; united in – and not in spite of – our diversity. Christ invites us to be a part of his body where difference leads not to division, but is celebrated; where all are welcome, accepted, and included.

May this be the church – and the world – for which we pray, strive, and make strides. For, in Christ, we are all one. Amen.

⁴ Andrew Prior, “The End of the Cosmos!”

⁵ Elisabeth Johnson