

No Social Distinctions
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Galatians 3: 23-29
May 28, 2017

As I've been getting ready to go on sabbatical, I've been thinking back over the last five years in ministry at First UCC. Years that have gone by in a flash, years that have been busy with ministry.

Before my family moved to Northfield, and I started serving here, I was serving two small UCC churches in Southwest Wisconsin. These were the churches where I started learning all of things they don't teach you in seminary that pastor's need to know. I remember one of my first pastoral calls with Elliot Brown, a retired dairy farmer who had lost the use of his legs in a battle with cancer. As I chatted with Elliot, he told me how he was shocked when at a visit like this one he discovered that the previous pastor didn't have Psalm 23 memorized. "Hmm," I said, trying to figure out how I could get out of the visit without revealing that I didn't have Psalm 23 memorized either. It was clear that Elliot liked to close a pastoral visit like this by reciting the 23rd Psalm. I closed the visit with a prayer, that I prayed with feeling. When I said, "Amen," and opened my eyes, Elliot was looking at me. He knew my secret. These churches were great places for me to begin in ministry, filled with great people, but these churches were small. I didn't always have very much to do. I was eager to be in a church that was vital, where I was busy.

Then I arrived here, and I've been busy, and it's been great. A list was handed me when I started, of things we needed to do. We needed to call an Associate Minister, revise our governance structure, plan a capital campaign, figure out a new format for our children's ministry, strengthen our youth ministry, and build on our commitment to social justice and live it out in a new way, and some other stuff. To the list of tasks given me, I added a few of my own because I couldn't help myself. We've been doing these things and more. And it has been busy and tremendous, and through it all I've been grateful for good work, grateful to be serving with you in the midst of a vibrant congregation.

After five years, I'm still very excited to be in ministry with you. I'm so proud of this church, who we have been and who we are. I'm grateful for the opportunity to take a sabbatical, and I will be eager to return to see what the Holy Spirit is going to do next.

Whether we are aware of it or not, our passage from Paul for today is at the very heart of who we are as a congregation. The verse, "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all are one in Christ Jesus," is an essential verse for a Progressive Christian Church like ours.

Paul's letter to the Galatians is his attempt to counteract the influence of other missionaries who are influencing the church in Galatia. The argument is about whether or not

the pagans that are joining the church need to follow Jewish dietary laws and practices like being circumcised in order to be included in the people of God, included in the promise of Abraham. The missionaries say the pagans have to follow Jewish practices. Paul says no they don't.

Paul is a practical guy. He just wants to solve problems. He doesn't think it is necessary for the pagans, the Greeks, to adopt Jewish practices. That would take too much time. It would keep people away. Having to be circumcised isn't the best selling point for joining a community. All the pagans need, he says, is to belong to Christ. What is very important to understand, is that Paul isn't saying that Judaism can just be dismissed because Jesus is here now. Paul isn't saying that Christianity is better than Judaism. Christianity as we know it as a religion hasn't emerged yet, it is still becoming. This is an argument that is happening within the Jewish faith. The question is what is needed for the Gentiles to be included in the people of God.

Paul is willing to think differently for the sake of inclusion. Paul is willing to let go of what he doesn't think is essential. What is essential for him is belonging to Christ. Paul's argument is that if you belong to Christ, you belong to God and you belong to Abraham. And Christ dismantles boundaries, erases distinctions. This is what is most important right now.

To make his case, Paul quotes this famous verse: there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all are one in Christ Jesus."

Scholars believe that this famous verse was a baptismal formula in the early church. Paul didn't make this up, he is quoting a part of the church's liturgy. I think the history here, and the symbolism are amazing. This verse tells us that the early church was a place where the social distinctions of the time were being erased.

A central distinction in the early church was between Jew and Gentile, or Jew and Greek, and we've already heard about the challenge with that. Another key distinction was between slave and free. In the Roman Empire, as many as 1 in 5 people were slaves. Slaves were taken from the losers in battle, and if you were born to a slave, you were a slave yourself. The Roman economy depended on slaves and wealthy people might have hundreds of slaves. Slaves were the lowest of the classes, even freed criminals had more rights. It was believed that the freedom of some was only possible because others were enslaved. This was embedded in Roman theology.

The early church was an alternative community that welcomed people into the living body of Christ, and invited them to live the values of the Kingdom of God, not of Rome. As men and women, Jews and Pagans, the wealthy and slaves joined the church, they were baptized. Scholars describe early baptisms like this: Initiates would remove their garments, and naked, were submerged in water, like in a grave, dying to the old life. They would come out of the water, like Christ coming out of the tomb, rising to a new life. They were given a new white garment to wear symbolizing their new life. And these words were said, "there is no longer Jew

or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all are one in Christ Jesus.” What is transforming here is clear. Those who were undervalued had new life in this community. Those who had privilege, gave it away for the sake of a wholeness that was greater.

Within the church, people started living out this new radical equality. And as you can imagine, since we are human beings, it didn't go smoothly or without conflict. Paul is radically including pagans without asking them to follow Jewish dietary practices and these pagans are eating with Jews and bringing shellfish and bacon to the church potluck. That will lead to fighting. No matter what you are told to believe, no matter how you are submerged in water and given a new piece of clothing, it is hard to suddenly treat someone you own, or someone your neighbor owns as a slave as an equal. Everything you have learned and internalized your whole life is that some people are inferior to you. Two weeks ago, we saw that in the church in Corinth, Paul was stressing to a few wealthy individuals that the slaves were indeed a part of the body of Christ and that they should be treated with greater honor. Also, scholars believe, and I think they are right, as women were baptized with this baptismal formula, they took it to heart. They tossed traditional gender roles to the side and they felt liberated to do any and all church jobs, including the jobs of apostles: preaching and baptizing. One of the books that didn't make it into the Bible, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, is a story that shows a woman preaching and baptizing, and historians believe this book was widely shared. Woven into our New Testament is an argument about the role and place of women in the church. My New Testament Professor in seminary, a woman, would say, “you don't need to tell women to be silent in church unless they are already speaking.

This little baptismal formula Paul quotes starts all kinds of trouble. Just like the early church and the New Testament, the church is still not in agreement on issues like: what elements of the tradition are essential and which ones aren't, to what extent is wealth and class and privilege an issue of gospel importance, and which jobs in the church are open to women? Obviously, we take sides on these issues and when we do, this verse rather than others in the New Testament is at the heart of our decision making.

I think the example of the early church speaks boldly to our present. The good news of God has something to do with us valuing all human beings and becoming more equal together. That's where we will take steps towards wholeness.

We belong to Christ, who erases social distinctions. We belong to Christ who seeks to include those who aren't normally included. We belong to Christ and we are a body who will be challenging the status quo for the sake of inclusion, for the sake of defending the powerless, for the sake of greater equality and greater wholeness for all of us. In this verse we begin to see what makes the good news of the gospel so powerful, filled with possibilities for transformation for our lives and the world. We begin to see who we are as a church, and perhaps we begin to imagine how we can become even more of who we already are. Amen.

