

“heirs according to the promise”
A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston
Thomaston Maine
Sunday, June 23, 2019
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Scripture: Galatians 3:23-29

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise. Galatians 3:23-29

Will you pray with me. Promise offering and promise keeping God, you propose to us the best there is in life and sometimes we don’t believe you. We think it can’t be true that we are heirs according to your promise. Help us to receive your word this day, O God. Help us to live into your promise in the days to come. Amen.

As I was preparing this sermon, I was reminded of an experience I had out on Isleboro some years ago. My friend and I rode the ferry over to the island, had a little picnic lunch at Pendleton Point, and then drove the loop road around the island before boarding the 1:30 p.m. ferry back to the mainland. On the loop road drive I was reminded of one aspect of island life that I had forgotten.

Whenever you pass someone on the road, you always, always wave to the driver coming toward you. It might be a “one finger wave,” or a “two finger wave,” or maybe even a “four finger wave,” but my experience in island driving has always been the same. People wave to one another – whether they’re local, “from away,” man or woman, rich or poor, Republican or Democrat, church goer or not, or any other designation or label that we too often use to separate ourselves.

Part of island life is acknowledging those coming towards one another from behind their steering wheels, no matter who they may be. In a town meeting, or another community gathering, people might not agree about politics, or religion or how they live their individual lives, but on an island, they’re all one behind the wheels of their cars or trucks. I was glad to be reminded of that fact of island life.

I’ve been thinking about this idea a lot lately, especially with all the issues that continue to divide us in our country – immigration reform, racial tensions, gay rights, political candidate and political party divisiveness, economic and health care issues, church disagreements about theology and God. All these matters divide us. I know they do. Even here in this congregation, I know we don’t all agree about politics and others matters, too.

Yet our passage from Galatians today really brings the “bottom line” of it all home to me. Verse 28 is one of Paul’s most well known statements in all of his letters to the new Christians he was shepharding and guiding in the first century, “There is no longer

Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3:28)

One of the quotes I put in your bulletins today expresses an important point about this verse: “In a church that celebrates equality in the face of social stratification and unity in the midst of individual distinctiveness, Galatians 3:28 holds an especially beloved place. As such, the question is not whether this text is useful; if anything, it has become a cipher of usefulness. The question is whether it can surprise us. It can. Repeatedly.”¹

The first surprise, it seems to me, and to commentator Mark Douglas, is that Paul doesn’t say one of these designations is better than the other – as in it’s better to be Jewish than Greek, or that it’s better to be free rather than slave, or that being male or female is the better way to be. He says “all of you [all of you] are one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3:28) No matter who you are!

“The second surprise follows from the first. It is that being clothed alike in Christ does not mean that distinctions disappear. Paul’s change in conjunctions, “Jew OR Greek,... slave OR free,... male AND female”.... suggests that the distinctions persist but lack determinate bearing for the faith.”²

In all of Paul’s letters we read that he clearly was not in agreement with some of what the first Christians were doing and saying, but he didn’t discount them or shun them because they were at odds with one another or with him.

He preached to them.....He broke bread with them..... He was a pastor to them.

They often left him feeling frustrated and angry, but he loved them all in spite of the differences that divided them. He called them to love one another as Jesus had loved them and as God would have all God’s children love one another.

Paul simply called the early Christians again and again to be involved with Jesus as the heir apparent to Abraham, to be “heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:29), to be “*in Christ*,” to put on the clothes of Christ as they lived and labored with one another and as they worshiped the God who brought us all to life.

God the Father, or the holy Parent of us all, calls us by name, each of us, and says through Paul, and many others, that we are one – no matter how much we resist that oneness, no matter how much we disagree about politics, or religion, or sexuality, or immigration reform, or economic or health matters.

People might fight like cats and dogs, do their best to kill one another off, and resist any involvement with those who are different from them. But we are still all one under God, indivisible, with the hope and the promise of liberty and justice for all, no matter how much each of us might want to adjust the terms of that liberty and justice to suit our personal views. As theologian Carter Hayward said some years ago, “We are all brothers and sisters, whether we like it or not.”³

¹Mark Douglas in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3, p. 162.

²*Ibid.*, p. 164.

³I can’t remember the source of this quote, but it’s in one of her books!

There is a sticking point for me, though, in Paul's theology. It's one I continue to struggle with and challenge and try to find clarity for in the midst of my affirmation of most of Galatians 3:28. My angst comes with the closing words of the verse, "for you are all one in Christ Jesus." On the one hand, these are such inclusive words I want to leap up and kiss Paul for saying and writing them.

On the other hand I want to question him seriously and ask, "So, what does that mean for those who are not Christian, who are perhaps Jewish, or Muslim, or Hindu, or Buddhist, or Native American and who do not see Jesus as their personal savior? How shall we reconcile their beliefs with Paul's inclusive, yet singular "Christ-as-savior-centered" theology?

Any ideas? (get responses) Two points come to mind for me. First, and always when a particular passage of the Bible causes me to shake my head in either disagreement or doubt, *remembering the context of the original work* is so important. Paul wasn't preaching to *us* with our modern, or even post modern, understanding of the wide range of faith traditions that pepper our world. Muhammad didn't even come onto the scene until some five centuries after Jesus' death. So Islam, the religion that Muhammad proclaimed, is an even later revelation of God in the world than Jesus was. Paul couldn't have known anything of the Islamic faith, or of the Native American spiritual traditions.

Paul's context was he was among people who for the most part probably were not Jews. They were Gentiles, perhaps "God fearers," as the Bible calls them, but not people who were following the law of Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament to us. He most likely was trying to help them understand, and certainly trying to convince them, they didn't have to follow Torah exactly as the Jews did in order to be people of God. They could follow this fellow Jesus as their Christ, *their* Savior, and live *by faith* in Jesus, not by *following* the religious laws of the day.

With that thought in mind I can be more forgiving of Paul's single-minded focus on Jesus as the Christ. It might sound narrow and exclusive to *me*, but it probably sounded freeing and inviting to those whom Paul was calling to faith.

Second, it is not for me or any of us to determine who's right and who's wrong in the religious debates that continue to rage around the world. No one of us can know for sure how the story is going to finally turn out. What we can continue to do is this – when someone comes toward us in a car or a pick up truck on an island, it would be a good idea to put up a hand in welcome and acknowledgment of them – maybe just a finger, or two, or maybe the whole hand. We don't need to know their religious, political, economic, sexual or any other particular detail about them in order to declare,

"I see you.

I acknowledge your place in the world.

I allow for you, as I hope you allow for me.

We are all heirs to the promise of God.

No blood relation required."

Let the people say, "Amen."