

## **Galatians 3:23-29**

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 reckoned as righteous 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.\*

## **According to the Promise** - June 19, 2022

*Galatians 3:23-29*

There's been a theme running through our worship lately. On Ascension Sunday, three weeks ago, we remembered that Jesus ended his earthly ministry but then was able to share it with all his followers. They and we are now just like Jesus. We all have a mission to spread the good news in all we say and all we do. Pentecost, which was two weeks ago, remembers how the first disciples took that mission to heart. On one amazing day, several dozen of Jesus' followers fanned out in Jerusalem, talking about Jesus, and everyone was able to hear the good news in their own language.

Last week was our wonderful Pride Sunday service and we went back to the very beginning of scripture. We heard once again that God created a good world, culminating in the creation of human beings to care for it all. We were reminded again that God created human beings in the image and likeness of God. In Genesis, God made no distinction among us. Male and female, of course, but nothing about race, color, sexual orientation, and all the other artificial distinctions we make among each other.

Which brings us to Paul's letter to the Galatians. The Galatians, like all the churches Paul founded, needed advice. They were trying to understand what being a Christian was about. The Galatians, like most of the communities Paul visited, were a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic bunch. The Roman Empire, no matter what you may think about it, did a remarkable job in homogenizing humanity. The Romans brought together people over a huge amount of territory, stretching from England to North Africa to Turkey and Iraq. Under the Romans, people mixed and mingled like they had never done before. Typically, when people from different cultures moved into the same village or town, they would settle in neighborhoods together. Makes sense, the same thing happens today. All our cities have sections which are dominated by one ethnic group or another. After all they shared the same language, customs, and sometimes families. Of course, they would generally prefer to stay together with people like themselves. But as believers in Jesus Christ, that was about to change.

Now consider the background of Paul. Paul was first and foremost a Jew. He was not from Jerusalem or even Israel. He was a Jew born and raised in the town of Tarsus. Tarsus is in what we now call Turkey, quite a distance away from Israel. He was certainly unaware of Jesus during Jesus' earthly ministry. However, Paul was always aware of his Jewish heritage.

Paul, like all Jews, grew up with a world view and a faith that taught him that he and his people had been specially chosen by God. Jews believed that the one and only God who created the Universe had singled them out, singled them out through a man named Abraham to have a relationship with God unlike no other group of human beings. Their God had given them a unique Law on which to

build their lives and society. God gave nothing like that to any other group of people. In their writings, the Jews pointed to numerous examples where their God spoke to them through prophets and intervened directly in their history.

Indeed in the history of the world, there are few if any examples of a group of people going into exile not just once but three times and then returning to their homeland. It happened when they first left Israel to go to Egypt. It happened again when the Babylonians destroyed Israel and captured their leaders. That might have been when Paul's ancestors went to Tarsus.

After Paul, the Jews were exiled a third time when in the year 66AD, the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and sent them in to exile all over the known world. As we know, the Jews did not formally return to their promised land until 1948, a exile lasting nearly 2000 years!

How many nations or ethnicities have been able to maintain their identities apart from their homeland for even a century, let alone a millennium? Ask Native Americans, African Americans how hard it is.

So yes, Paul's Jewish heritage was strong within him. He knew who he was and the tradition he was part of.

Yet here in the letter to the Galatians, Paul seems to be throwing it all away when he says, "There is no longer Jew or Greek." In short, he is relinquishing he claim to have a special relationship with God based on his bloodline, his heritage, his tradition. Blood no longer matters. Nationality no longer matters. Ethnic background no longer matters. Language, customs, laws no longer matter for Christians. To God, we are all the same. The foolish human distinctions we put so much stock in of nationality, race, language are in God's eyes irrelevant.

But then, Paul knocks down another pillar of common thinking: economic status. Friends, economic status is as important today as it was two thousand years ago when it comes to our judging each other. After all, like it or not, are we not aware of who the rich and powerful are in our own society? Don't we have a habit of associating wealth and possessions with status and rank? Perhaps we do it involuntarily, but when we drive past the fancy homes down King's Highway in Haddonfield or see a person driving a Rolls-Royce, don't we think, "Well, they've got it made." Don't we tend to defer to those with money and privilege? After all, they are rich, they must know something, don't they?

Yet here in his letter, Paul is attacking the human assumption that in God's eyes, rich people are superior to poor people. Paul writes that in Christ, "there is no longer slave or free." That's a remarkable statement. Consider that when Paul was alive, perhaps as many as one out of four people were slaves!

Therefore in Christ, it doesn't matter whether you have money or not. It doesn't matter whether you are at the top or bottom of the economic ladder. It doesn't matter whether you are the employer or employee, owner or slave. It just doesn't matter to God in Jesus Christ.

And one final distinction Paul eliminates in his letter to the Galatians. Paul says, "there is no longer male and female," Gender simply doesn't matter in terms of defining what a human being is. Recall last week when we read from Genesis and heard that "God created them male and female." Yes, God did create genders but God did not create gender as a means to separate us or rank us. In Christ, therefore, it doesn't matter about gender or by implication how you as an individual understand your own sexual identity. I mean, yes, sexual identity is important for each person. However, it cannot ever be used as a way to rank each other or judge each other as if there were some expressions of sexual identity that were "better" than others. No! In Christ men are not superior to women, nor can women be superior to men. Straight and Gay are meaningless terms as long as you conduct your life in accordance with how God wants you to. As long as you live a life of respectfulness -- respecting your own identity and upholding how others identify themselves, then you are truly fulfilling God's vision for how God created your life, regardless of what society thinks. Only God's opinion matters.

The church in Galatia, like many of the churches Paul founded, was a mix of people of all races, backgrounds, and nationalities. They had heard the life-changing words of Jesus and want to live their lives in a new way, an equal way. They wanted to follow the path of love and not hate. Paul's purpose in writing his letter was to celebrate the fact that in Jesus we all are one! The foolish distinctions we make among ourselves simply don't matter anymore.

Yet, friends, nearly 2000 years after Paul wrote these words we are still making huge, life-destroying decisions based on race, wealth, and gender. How much hatred is there in our nation, in our world! How many have died this year alone because someone hated the victim's race or nationality? How can entire governments be mobilized to discriminate on the basis of gender or sexual identity? How many wounded people are there in the world who have been told all their lives that there is something horribly wrong with them because they don't look the right way or speak the right way or love the right way -- whatever the "right way" happens to be?

How can we have so much money promoting lies and hatred on television on the internet on social media. Why? Why? Why do we automatically assume people with money are also people with brains, with morality, with wisdom?

In Christ Jesus, we are all one! There is no Jew or Greek, no American or Russian, no Chinese or Tibetan, no African or European, no Brahmin or Untouchable, no Hutu or Tutsi! We are all one! In Christ Jesus, there is no slave or free. Yes! the lowest paid worker is the same as her grossly

overpaid boss. There is a huge, evil, assumption that the poor are poor because they are lazy and the rich are rich because they worked hard and got ahead because they earned it. No, we know the real truth. Yes, there are lazy people out there, but many of them are not poor. Many of them were born at the right time in the right place with the right skin color and, yes, the right genitalia. And they can be lazy because society gives them permission to be lazy. Whereas those born in the so-called "wrong" places with the so-called "wrong" skin color with the so-called "wrong" gender or sexual orientation never even having the chance to shine -- the chance to demonstrate the glorious talents and abilities with which God has blessed them.

Friends, in this letter from the Apostle Paul, the one Jesus chose to spread the good news to everyone, to prove that Christ's message is meant not just for Jews but for every single human being --- this letter is and must be our weapon as the Church, our weapon to attack the evil and hatred swirling all around us.

Yes, we know the truth, we have the truth! As I said last week, God created a paradise in which all human beings are equal -- equally created and equally loved by God.

But, friends, we are failing, we are failing in our mission unless all of us, all of us, all of us, you and me together stand up, stand up, stand up against the haters and the fools who want to create differences among us when God says there are not.

Yes! Right before us friends is the voice of authority, true authority. The Bible is not one person's opinion. It is not something made up by a bunch of crazy folks a long time ago. No the Bible and every word in it is the inspired, living, truth-filled Word of God. And our God says through the Apostle Paul that we, we, all of us, are heirs, equal and equally loved heirs to the promise God made to Abraham thousands of years ago. We are all equal parts of God's beautiful, wonderful, marvelous, equality-loving creation.

By our faith, our binding faith, in Jesus Christ, every stupid human thing that drives us apart is cancelled. Stupid nationalities don't matter! Stupid wealth and power don't matter! Stupid distinctions of gender and sexual orientation just don't matter! All that matters is Jesus Christ and whether we choose to follow him in faith. If we do, when we do, as we do, Christ makes us all equal, fills us with same Holy Spirit, and tells us, over and over again. God loves you and God loves you and God loves you. Now and forever!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.