

A sermon preached by Melanie Weiner
Congregational Church of Almaden Valley, United Church of Christ
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1 Kings 19:1-15a (NRSV)
Galatians 3:23-29 (NRSV)

What if Paul Wrote Today?

I will come back to Galatians in a few minutes, but first I would like to share with you a little about what I have learned and a little more about what I believe about the Bible. In Sunday School last spring, we experienced a unit called “Dig Into the Bible.” One of the main points we learned was that the Bible was written by people like us for people like us about people like us. At the same time I was taking a seminary class called “Interpreting the Bible: Methods and Issues.” During one of the last lectures in this course, each of our instructors spoke about Biblical authority. Prof. Jeffrey Kuan passionately reminded us that the Bible is not God. The Bible is a collection of stories, laws, letters, poetry, even history. We can read it to learn about peoples' attempts to understand and relate to God. The Bible was written ABOUT God (and people). The Bible was not written BY God. We worship God. We don't worship the Bible. Our living, loving, changing God cannot be confined to or defined by words written by people.

Which is why I don't feel sacrilegious when I say that I often do not appreciate what Paul writes in his letters. Don't get me wrong. Paul did important work in the early church, spreading the gospel and supporting the communities. But Paul was just a regular Pharisee, a professional tent-maker, who experienced a radical transformation and began to serve God's people instead of persecute them. His letters often take a legalistic point of view that I find contrary to my understanding of God. So imagine my surprise at standing before you today talking about a passage from Paul's writings.

The letter to the Galatians is considered to be authentically Paul's by most Biblical scholars. It's a very early letter, written hurriedly and in a state of agitation and anger. Paul wrote this letter as a response to increasing demands by some Jewish Christians that Gentile Christians be subject to Mosaic law. The Galatians people are Gentiles, converted to Christianity by Paul. Paul is not interested in his message of faith and love in Christ being muddled up in laws about observing Jewish feasts, keeping kosher, and being circumcised. He has to tread carefully and with his usual conservatism, sharing his understanding of the gospel, the good news, and not undermining the Torah. That said, what he is saying in this passage is radical, even by today's standards. In the highly stratified first century Roman empire, every person has their station in life. Every person knew where he or she stood in the community's pecking order, and privileges and responsibilities were directly related to status.

Let's hear one more time what Paul writes to the Galatian churches: “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.” (Gal 3:26-29)

What is Paul saying here? We are all children of God through faith. He goes on to speak about being baptized into Christ and clothing ourselves with Christ. This refers to our coming together to form the body of Christ. As I spoke with the children, when we put on new clothes, we feel new in some way. Special perhaps. It gives us a new attitude. Our clothes can serve to remind us of the image we wish to present to the world. So it is with this image of clothing ourselves with Christ. When we do so we remind ourselves of the image we hope the world to see in us.

Then comes what I believe is the real core of what Paul is trying to explain to the community of his time, and which is equally valid for us. “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.” (v. 28) Paul is telling the people that the divisions typical in their society have no place in a community of faith. When we come together to worship God, when we come together to share a meal at Christ's table, when we come together to do God's work, we are equally needed, equally valued, and equally loved. Now Paul is not saying that there are no differences between us or that those differences should be erased. The people will still be Jew or Greek (by which he means Gentile). They will still be either male or female. Unfortunately some will still be slaves while others are free. What he is saying is that as each person is loved and valued as a child of God, as a member of the family. In the body of Christ, the human constructions that divide us and place us in boxes have no place. When we clothe ourselves in Christ we don't give up our identities. Rather we become one with Christ in the one aspect that we all share – the love of God – and we become united in our efforts to serve God.

Now our society no longer puts people in categories the same way that Paul's community did. We don't define people by whether they are Jew or Greek (remember that means Gentile in this context). Women are no longer as subservient to men as they were in that time, though there is still work to be done in that area. I really hope we have no slaves here in the land of the free. So what would Paul write if he was writing to us today to instruct us in how to relate to each other? If Paul needed to tell us that all are loved and valued equally in God's eyes, what dichotomies would he choose? Perhaps he would say, “In Christ there is no longer white or black or brown.” Well I guess we would call that a trichotomy, but you get the point, and we like lists of three, right? What about “In Christ there is no longer rich or poor.” No autistic or neurotypical. No gay or straight. No citizen or alien. No conservative or liberal. In Christ there is no Red Sox fan or Yankees fan.

What does this mean for us? This usually conservative guy, this man who generally upholds the societal standards for dress, behavior, and power structure, believes in the love and acceptance of God for all of God's children. He believes that in Christ we are all valued. He espouses radical inclusivity right there in the Bible.

Paul doesn't say that we have to like everyone, that we have to all agree on every matter that we discuss. What he says is deceptively simple. God's love is for all. Being one in Christ Jesus doesn't mean we think in lockstep. It means that we walk together and work together to carry out Christ's work in our community and in the world. Paul concludes this passage by saying that our faith makes us children of Abraham and heirs of his promise. I think, rather than referring explicitly to the covenant with Abraham, Paul is saying that by faith we are members of the

body of Christ. And if a person is, by virtue of their faith, a member of the body of Christ, how could we possibly consider that person not eligible for membership or leadership or ministry in church? How could we deny the basic humanity of any beloved child of God, any brother or sister in Christ?

Fortunately here in this congregation we don't deny anyone membership or leadership or opportunity for ministry; we don't deny anyone's humanity. We have a history of bitter discussion when our opinions differ on issues that are important to us, but I believe we have moved to a point where we can create safe space for discussing and resolving contentious issues. We have moved to a place where, like Elijah on Mt. Horeb, we can wait through the wind and the fire and the earthquake and through our own overwhelming fears to hear God's voice in the deep silence. And in listening to that stillspeaking voice, I believe we will find that like Elijah, there is still work for us to do in our community.