

SERMON TITLE: “You are All One”

TEXT: Galatians 3:23-29

PREACHED AT: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

BY: Ryan Dueck

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INTRODUCTION

Good morning, it’s nice to be with you. We have appreciated the welcome our family has received this weekend during our visit to your church community!

One of my deepest convictions is that it is through the stories of our lives that God trains us to think and live according to his bigger story.

Whether as individuals or as churches, we are shaped by what we have experienced.

It’s been good to get to know many of you this weekend, but we are still mostly strangers to each other here this morning. It is through the sharing of our stories that we begin to discern how God has been at work in our respective contexts.

This morning’s sermon may be a bit different than you are accustomed to, but I am hopeful that in sharing a few stories from my journey, we will hear God’s word in perhaps a fresh and new way this morning.

THREE STORIES: THREE SNAPSHOTS

Snapshot #1: Walter and Iris

Some of you may know that the church I have been serving at for the last three years is “Neighbourhood Church” in Nanaimo, BC. It is a delightful church with many delightful people in it.

But I have never been a huge fan of the *name*.

Neither part of the name—the “neighbourhood” or the “church” seemed to meet my criteria—both seemed hopelessly non-communicative, utterly lacking in precision and clarity (I’m so humble!).

Or so I was inclined to think, until one Sunday morning in our first year.

About 15 minutes before our Sunday service, a taxi pulled up to within a few feet of our front doors. With a great deal of effort, an older couple slowly extricated themselves and the wheelchair of the husband from the cab, and *very* slowly made their way into the church.

They were quite a sight—neither one of them taller than five feet, neither one weighing more than 100 lbs, both looking a little fragile and uncertain.

They participated in the service, and a member of our church helped them fill out a guest card where they checked off the box that said “would like a visit.”

Next week, I was off to figure out who Walter and Iris were and how they had come to be among us.

It turns out they hadn’t darkened the door of a church of any kind in at least a decade.

They had no children, no living siblings, no nieces and nephews that they were in contact with, no friends at the senior’s centre, no... *anything*. There were no pictures of family on their walls, no mementos, no heirlooms, nothing.

Just two old, frail, lonely people existing in the same space without anyone to care about them in any way. In some ways it was a heartbreaking visit and I left feeling very heavy.

So what brought them to our church?

These people had *no idea* what denomination our church belonged to. She came from a nominal Anglican background, he was a Chinese man with little connection to the Christian tradition at all, aside from a brief time spent at a United Church a couple of decades ago.

They had no idea what an “Anabaptist” church might be, much less a “Mennonite Brethren” one, and seemed to have very little interest in the kind of doctrinal details that I had been swimming in for the past number of years at graduate school.

They came because the sign said “Neighbourhood Church” and they were a part of the neighbourhood.

The reason they came to our church was mostly because they were just really lonely people who didn’t have a lot of human contact. They were looking for somewhere to belong, somewhere they were welcome, somewhere where they were noticed and cared for, somewhere where their age and their physical limitations were not barriers to connecting with others.

They were looking for community.

Snapshot #2: Saanich Community Church

A few weeks later, I was in beautiful Victoria to preach class at our sister MB church there.

It was a very unique church comprised mainly of well-educated white-collar types. Many of them worked at the University of Victoria or for the government in some capacity.

The worship service was formal and highly structured; there was a strong sense of reverence and propriety. There was beautiful artwork throughout the sanctuary and a high degree of musical skill evident in the singing time.

The theme of the service was “called to community” and I shared the story of Walter and Iris to illustrate the kind of welcome the church was called to extend—the kind of community that the church of Christ was called to be.

It was a very intellectually satisfying worship experience—it reminded me, in some ways, of the chapels that I was a part of during my time at Regent College. Meaningful hymns, well-crafted liturgies, thoughtful and sensitive prayers.

My message seemed to be very well received and I had several intellectually stimulating, enjoyable conversations after the service.

It was a life-giving and soul-nourishing morning, and I left feeling very pleased with the experience.

It feels good, after all, to be told that your ideas are appreciated and it is nice to worship with smart and sophisticated people!

Snapshot #3: Nanaimo Correctional Centre

Later that same Sunday it was off to the Nanaimo Correctional Centre for a couple of worship services with the inmates there.

You could hardly imagine, obviously, a more different worship experience than the one I had been a part of earlier in the day.

The inmates trickled in wearing red coveralls—an obvious and omnipresent reminder of their “separateness” from the rest of us—and took their seats in the sparsely decorated chapel.

A few songs were sung, mostly off key and with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Two of the prisoners stumbled through the Scripture readings, the chaplain delivered an informal and not altogether coherent homily, there was a prayer time, followed by a few more songs and a benediction.

At the end, there was a bit of time for cookies and coffee to be hurriedly stuffed back over conversation before the guard arrived to lead the inmates back to their cells.

Not exactly a foretaste of heaven ☺.

I spent a lot of time over the next few weeks thinking about the passage we have already heard read this morning from Galatians 3. In verse 28 Paul writes: “You are all one in Christ Jesus.”

These words rang a bit hollow as I reflected on these three snapshots.

On one level, we don’t really *seem* to be one. It was hard for me to imagine a world where the prisoners I worshiped with in the evening would feel comfortable with the highly-educated professionals I worshiped with in the morning or with a frail, lonely old couple looking for a “neighbourhood” church

Paul speaks of how the lines we use to divide ourselves have been abolished in Christ but they still felt pretty real as I reflected upon these three lenses.

We still have very clear categories, even in the church. Educated/uneducated, white-collar/blue-collar, formal/informal, volunteer/convict, old/young, in/out....

Whatever unity Christ has made possible among human beings seemed more of a future hope than a present reality to me as I reflected upon these three snapshots in the days and weeks that followed.

Galatians 3: Context and Community

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

This is a well known and a well-loved text. I think it’s one of those texts that pastors have no trouble preaching on.

You are all one in Christ Jesus.

I think that most of us like this idea. There is an equality and an openness to others in this statement that we probably find appealing at some level.

Increasingly, our nation and our cities and towns are comprised of very diverse kinds of people. We are a nation known for its inclusivity; we like the idea of all kinds of people being welcome. It sounds good to say (and to hear), “You are all one.”

But the context into which these words were first delivered is worth considering. It was not 21st century Canada.

The church in Galatia was a fractious and unruly bunch, deeply divided by questions of ethnicity and the role of Jewish ritual in the new Christian movement.

Paul is at his most agitated in the letter to the Galatians, and the objects of his ire are a group of people teaching that authentic discipleship required observing the Jewish law—specifically, that *Jewish marks of identity (i.e., circumcision) should be imposed upon Gentile converts*.

The central issue in Galatians could be reduced, in a nutshell to this: **what determines identity and belonging in the kingdom community instituted by Christ?**

Is it external markers and ritual observances that justify us? Or is it God's actions, God's character, and God's promise that is the basis for our justification before him?

"You are all one," Paul says.

The divisions that used to shape and influence your lives and communities—racial divisions, divisions based on patterns of ritual and worship, socio-economic divisions, gender divisions, divisions based on education level or age—these are no longer to determine reality as they did in the past.

The new reality is Jesus Christ, and his promise.

And because of Jesus Christ—his teaching, his living, his dying, his rising, his eventual return, and the overall pattern of his ministry and message in the world—new possibilities are opened to us, new ways of living together not just *with* one another but *for* and *through* one another.

Perhaps as citizens of a modern 21st century pluralistic nation Paul's words don't initially strike us as terribly radical, but they certainly would have been in his context. The kind of community made possible by Christ that Paul was describing was totally unique!

It was an utterly revolutionary understanding of community! For those who were formerly outsiders—slaves, women, Gentiles—this is unbelievably good news!

Good News?

And this news is spoken into our context as well. Is it still good news for us—for modern, twenty-first century, inclusive, tolerant Canadians?

I think it is. I think that whatever progress we may have made (or *think* we have made) since Paul's day, we are still people who need good news.

Why? One way to get at an answer is to ask this question: *What problem does the gospel ("good news") fix?*

If our answer to this question is "the problem of our individual broken relationships with God," our understanding of "community" will be a partial and inadequate one. The

community will be understood to exist to serve the needs of individuals and how to get their “souls saved.” This has been a common answer, especially for those associated with the Evangelical tradition.

But if our answer to the question “what problem does the gospel solve?” *includes* the problem of our fractured individual relationships with God, but *goes beyond this* to include the problem of our broken relationships with one another, with ourselves, with creation, then our understanding of “community” will be much fuller and, I would argue, more biblical.

The community now becomes the kind of place where:

- divisions between human beings are challenged and repaired
- people come to fuller and more healthy understandings of themselves by virtue of seeing our strengths and weaknesses, needs and gifts in our relationships with others
- we come to appreciate how our differences as individuals and communities and how these contribute the larger community of God’s kingdom
- we together come to understand our obligations to the world God has made, that he loves dearly, and that he seeks to redeem and restore.

Community is sometimes messy, complicated, frustrating, inconvenient, and painful.

It’s also delightful, life giving, redemptive, and vitally necessary. Whatever our experience happens to be at any given time the point is that *God does not give us the option of not depending on one another.*

God does not give us the option of a privatized salvation where we enjoy the bliss of relating to God in the privacy of our own hearts and minds. God created us for himself, but he also created us for each other.

And what Galatians 3 tells us is that because of what Christ has done—because of the new kind of community he made possible— the lines that we so often use to describe in and out, chosen and rejected, blessed and cursed no longer apply.

The kind of community God has in mind is one where the first are last and the last first, where those who were previously rejected and looked down on are welcomed in, where people of all kinds come together and collectively represent God’s creational intent.

YOU **ARE** ALL ONE

As I was reading this passage earlier this week it struck me what Paul doesn’t say in this passage. He does not say “There *ought* to be neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female.”

He does not say that because of what Christ has done we *ought* to all be one. He does not say, “Given what’s been accomplished for you, you should all start acting a little bit more unified and start putting into practice some of the truths of what you believe.”

Undoubtedly, Paul wants and expects the Galatian church’s behaviour to change. He wants them to *act* more unified.

But rather than just giving them a laundry list of possible behaviour modifications, he appeals to what actually *is* the case, regardless of what it might look like on the ground.

Regardless of how well the truth of the matter is being implemented.

You *are* all one in Christ Jesus.

What might Paul say to us? We may not have people advocating following Jewish ritual as the test of who is following Jesus most authentically in our communities, but we human beings have never had problems finding criteria over which to divide ourselves.

Even in the church: Catholic/Orthodox vs. Protestant; high church vs. low church; charismatic vs. traditional; fundamentalist vs. liberal; mystical vs. rationalistic... The list goes on and on.

And I think Paul’s message would be the same for us. You are all one. Whether you like it or not, whether it feels like it or not. You are all one.

You are free from the need to make divisions amongst yourself. You are free to let your lives as communities reflect the truth of what the good news of Jesus Christ has accomplished.

Just as it was two thousand years ago, this is genuinely *good news*.

Future Breaking Into the Present

And God still gives us glimpses of this good news, even if it doesn’t always *seem* like we are all one in Christ Jesus

We get glimpses of this future reality breaking into the present. I saw this in each of the three snapshots I mentioned at the beginning.

Walter and Iris kept coming to our church. They even took membership classes and got baptized! The church helped them out with practical needs as best we could until they moved back to Abbotsford. They found neighbours at Neighbourhood Church, even if only for a while.

And that congregation full of sophisticated white-collar types in Victoria? Well, they’ve been exploring ways that they can be a part of providing low-income housing in the

community they are a part of. They are seeking to reach out to those who are unlike them.

The jail? Well, as a part of his homily, the chaplain had read the inmates a story from CNN about a little girl in Afghanistan who spent six hours a day begging for bread because her dad was strung out on drugs and couldn't/wouldn't provide for his wife and daughters. It was a heartbreaking story, but made little perceptible impact at the time of its reading.

Or so I thought. During the prayer time of the jail service, one large, red-faced young man boomed out the following prayer:

Hi God. It's Tyler again. I'm getting out on Tuesday and I need you to help me make it this time. Please watch over me God.

And God, please give this girl in Afghanistan some bread. I work in the kitchen, and I know that we throw a lot of bread in the garbage every day. It's terrible and we shouldn't do it. The amount of bread we throw out each day could probably feed a whole village. I don't know God, she needs some of our bread. Just please, give this little girl some bread.

You are all one in Christ Jesus. Really?

Really. You are all one.

Those jetting off to accept post-doctoral fellowships and those behind bars for the fifth time in the last ten years.

Those who are able-bodied and strong, and those for whom making it five blocks to church is a half-hour procedure involving wheelchairs and lifts and many helping hands.

Those whose prayers are eloquent and rich in theological truth and those just desperately seeking help in making it on the outside this time.

Those who sing majestic hymns in beautiful four-part harmony and those who can't hold a tune and lurch half-heartedly through a simple chorus.

Those who worship in clean, comfortable, and aesthetically-pleasing sanctuaries and those who sit on plastic chairs in a concrete room with little more than an old piano and a simple wooden cross on the wall.

Those with bread to spare and those who need them to spare it.

You are all one in Christ Jesus.

May God help us—whether we live in Lethbridge or Nanaimo or Galatia—to be people who embody authentic communities, where all are welcome and all are cared for. May God help us to represent the oneness between people that *has come about* and is *already a reality* because of what Christ has done for us.

Thanks be to God.