

SERMON TITLE: “You are All One”

TEXT: Galatians 3:26-29

PREACHED AT: Gateway Community Church, Port Alberni, BC

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Today is Pentecost Sunday, the day when Christians around the world celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit. When we look at the events of Acts 2 we see that it is a kind of reversal of Genesis 11—the Tower of Babel. Where Babel was about God confusing the languages of human beings so they would not destroy each other, Pentecost is about reunification and empowerment in the Spirit. At Pentecost there is unity instead of disunity, there is a coming together of multiple tribes and languages.

At Pentecost, a new community is formed. This community will no longer be based exclusively on ethnicity or ritual observance but faith in and obedience to Jesus Christ.

So because it's Pentecost Sunday, I thought I would talk about community this morning—about the kind of community that we, as Christians are called to. But I'd like to begin with a story. Actually, it's kind of a confession, of sorts.

When Naomi (my wife) and I first began to dialogue with Neighbourhood Church in Nanaimo about the pastoral position, one of the things that made me hesitate was the name of the church. We were instantly impressed with the openness and friendliness of the community, with their honesty and transparency, with the commitment to Jesus we sensed among them, with the city of Nanaimo as a place to live, and with a whole host of other things.

But I wasn't sold on the name.

I was nearing the end of graduate studies at Regent College, my head swimming with precise doctrinal and denominational distinctives, and the names of things *mattered* to me. *I wanted to know*, when I looked at the sign in front of a church—whether the church was in Vancouver, Nanaimo, or Timbuktu!—what that church believed, where they fit on the denominational spectrum, what kind of preaching, liturgy, music style, and prayers I could or could not expect.

I liked signs like “Kerrisdale Presbyterian,” or St. John's Anglican or “Bakerview Mennonite Brethren Church, or any other simply designated representation of the beliefs of a congregation. I like clear definitions and categories. Why not something simple like “Nanaimo Mennonite Brethren Church?”

The name “Neighbourhood Church,” at least initially, was not high on my list of clear and definitive names (“Saanich Community Church” wouldn't have been acceptable either, I'm afraid...). But “Neighbourhood Church? What on earth does that mean? What *kind* of church is it? A Baptist church? United? Evangelical Free? Christian Reformed? Pentecostal? Is it even a *Christian* church?

And what about the “neighbourhood” part? *Which* neighbourhood? Harewood? Jingle Pot? Brechin Hill? Hammond Bay? So 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.

Or so I was inclined to think, until about six months ago.

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. I took notice of the couple, but initially didn’t think too much of them beyond being glad they were there and curious as to what brought them there. Turns out, I would get the opportunity to find out.

A member of our church helped them fill out a guest card and they checked off the box that said “would like a visit.” Well, I figured that as the “pastor of congregational care” this probably fell under my job description, so next week I called them up to ask when would be a good time for me to pop by.

Initially, they didn’t seem to know what I was talking about, who I was, or why I wanted to come see them. After a rather long and meandering conversation, we finally established that I was responding to their visit to “Neighbourhood Church” the previous Sunday and would like to come over. So we arranged a time, and off my wife Naomi and I went to hear a bit of their story.

It turns out they hadn’t darkened the door of a church of any kind in at least a decade. The reason they came to our church now was mostly, I think, because they were just really lonely people who don’t have a lot of human contact.

They had no children, no living siblings, no nieces and nephews that they are 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.

And this is where we get back to my initial story of church names...

These people had *no idea* what denomination our church belonged to. She comes from a nominal Anglican background, he is 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, they seem to have very little interest in the kind of doctrinal details that I

had been swimming in for the past number of years—in fact, they didn’t seem to have too much interest in “spiritual” matters at all!

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

They simply wanted—needed, actually!—someone to act like a neighbour to them. 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.

The sign outside your church says “Gateway *Community* Church.” Among other things, this says that you are seeking both to *be* an authentic Christian community and to reach the community you live in, Port Alberni.

Now, the fact *that* we are called to community as Christians seems obvious to me and likely to you as well. From the very beginning, God decided that it was not good for us to be alone, and at every stage along the redemption story there has been some form of community or other that has been the means through which God’s salvation message is carried forward.

The question is, “What *kind* of community are we called to?” And I think Galatians 3:26-29 sets us on the path to answering this question:

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. It fits well into our ecumenical, multicultural, pluralistic Canadian mindsets.

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, as Canadians probably find appealing at some level. Many of us live in communities that are comprised of very different kinds of people. We are a nation known for its inclusivity; we like the idea of all kinds of people being welcome.

But the context into which these words were first delivered is worth pausing over. It was not 21st century Canada. The church in Galatia was a fractious and unruly bunch, divided by questions of ethnicity and the role of Jewish ritual in the new Christian movement. Paul is at his most agitated in Galatians, and the objects of his ire are a group of people teaching that authentic Christ-following required observing the Jewish law.

This group was not made up of Pharisaic Jews seeking to persuade the Galatians to abandon their faith in Christ; rather, they were Christian Jews who argued that the appropriate next step for Gentiles who had come to trust Jesus as the Messiah was to undergo circumcision—a Jewish religious ritual—as a sign of their inclusion in God’s covenant. Much of Paul’s distress in the letter to the Galatians has to do with this insistence (by some) that Jewish marks of identity should be imposed upon Gentile converts.

The issue could be reduced, in a nutshell to this: it is a quarrel between Paul and his opponents over **what the shape of the kingdom community instituted by Christ ought to look like**. This is what Paul was fighting for in the book of Galatians. This is why he comes across as a bit grouchy and antagonistic.

For Paul, the very character of the faith community is at stake. This is why he goes to so much trouble in other parts of this letter to spell out the role of the law, the reason for Abraham’s justification, the authenticity of the gospel message, etc, etc.

For Paul, the importance of *God’s initiative* in the salvation process cannot be undermined. It is not external markers or ritual observances that justify us; it is God’s actions, God’s character, and God’s promise that is the basis for our justification before him. And the objects of this divine initiative are... *all of us* (not just Jews, or those who adopt their customs).

“*You are all one*,” Paul says. The divisions that used to shape and influence your lives and communities—racial divisions, divisions based on 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!

The church in Galatia was obviously not alone in their clinging to and relying on divisions. In fact, this was pretty much the norm in most areas. For example, a common thanksgiving prayer for Jews, Romans, Greeks, and others in the first-century was: “thank you that I was born a man and not an irrational animal, a non-heathen/barbarian, and not a woman.”

Into *this* context, Paul says “*You are all one in Christ Jesus*.”

This is an utterly revolutionary understanding of community! For those who were formerly outsiders—slaves, women, Gentiles—this is unbelievable news! This is *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 since Paul's day, we are a 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.

The story of the Bible is creation, fall, and then *covenant community*—page after page of community. This is the context in which our redemption takes place.

A community is how God "gets stuff done" in the world. If God's only purpose was to save us as individuals, it is difficult to account for everything that has taken place up to this point in salvation history. First with Israel, then with the church, God has always been moving the story forward through a people—a people in which the individual's identity and well-being is tied up the larger group.

The scope of God's salvation goes far beyond repairing the relationship between human beings and himself; our relationship to others must be healed as well; we must learn how to properly see ourselves; and we must re-learn how we were intended to be stewards of creation.

And a community is how God has decided that all this will get done.

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 contemplating or 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—the kind of community that where his image-bearers represent him to a world starved for genuine community—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.

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

Returning to the story I began with, the question I mulled over for the days following our visit with this elderly couple was this: What does it mean to be a “minister of the gospel” to two people who are much closer to death than life, who are lonely, probably a little confused, almost certainly unaware of/uninterested in most of the things I've spent the last decade or so studying in some form or another?

What kind of news would be “good” to these people? To discover that their sins are forgiven? That Jesus loves them? That they'll go to heaven? Sure. I don't doubt that these are important things to communicate. But I think that they were also looking for another, more concrete kind of “good news.”

In Luke 10:29 the expert in the law asks Jesus the famous question: “Who is my neighbour?” It's a question that comes out of a desire to fix limits around the extent of our obligations to others—it's as if he's saying, “OK, I know I have to love my neighbour to get eternal life. Well just tell me who counts as a ‘neighbour’ so I'll make sure to love them and not extend myself any more than I have to.” In the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus exposes as wrong-headed and as missing the point.

Jesus never answers his question. He doesn't tell him who fits into the "neighbour" category that he has to love. Rather, he tells a story of a man in need and various people's responses to this man's need. The question Jesus leaves the expert in the law with is: "Who *acted* like a neighbour?" The expert was looking to find out whom he had to love; Jesus showed him how real neighbours acted. It's an amazing parable!

Of the many things that this parable communicates, I think that at rock bottom it means that "good news" has to go beyond "saving information" for individuals. "Good news" for the man on the side of the road came in the form of a neighbour who was willing to help him in his pain, to share his burden, to meet his need.

In the same way, although they probably wouldn't put it this way, what prompted the elderly couple to call a cab to take them to "Neighbourhood Church" a month ago was a God-given longing and hunger for community.

They needed neighbours—in Jesus' sense of the word—someone to meet them in their trials, to listen to their stories, to give them a ride to church so they don't have to pay money they don't have for a five-minute taxi ride, to try to get them some help taking care of their house, to listen to their stories, perhaps for the fifth time in an hour...

They've been coming to our church for the last eight months or so. They don't come every Sunday—they don't always feel well enough to come—but they come when they can. They sit off on the right side of the sanctuary (she's deaf in her right ear and can't sit in the middle again), they struggle to see the words on a screen they can't really read, they listen to songs that they've never heard before and are probably too loud for their liking, they listen to prayers and a sermon that likely seem fairly foreign to them, and they generally go to a fair amount of effort to put themselves out there in a group of mostly strangers.

They decided to make us their church home. They took membership classes last fall, and were baptized on November 30. We couldn't immerse them, but we did what we could.

And the church has embraced them. Naomi and I found a bigger TV for them so they didn't have to squint at their 13-inch unit from the kitchen. Others in our church have visited them; some have begun to find out about lifeline, and other supportive services that might be open to them because he is veteran. We brought them to our Christmas banquet and services so they didn't have to go through another holiday season alone.

And all of this because they saw a sign that said "Neighbourhood Church" and because they were a part of the neighbourhood. Because they needed community.

This is the first time I've ever been to Port Alberni so I obviously don't know much about your community at all. But I'm willing to bet that there are Walters and Irises among you too—among the people you rub shoulders with every day. They may not be old and frail or quirky in the same ways... But our world is full of people who need the kind of neighbours Jesus describes in Luke 10. Our world is full of people who need the kind of

communities that Paul describes in Galatians 3. They live in Jerusalem in Galatia... in Nanaimo... and in Port Alberni.

May God help us to be the kind of people and places where the least of these—the lonely, the weary, the frail and beaten down, the frightened, the confused, the bitter, the angry, the hopeless find the neighbours they need. May God help us to be people who embody authentic communities, where all are welcome and all are cared for, no matter their race, their social status, their gender, their age, or their physical or mental well-being. May God help us to represent the oneness between people that is possible because of what he has done for us.

Thanks be to God.