

SERMON TITLE: “You are All One”

TEXT: Galatians 4:4-7

PREACHED AT: Highland Community Church, Abbotsford, BC

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INTRODUCTION

It’s always an interesting proposition for me to be a “guest speaker.” One of the things I believe about preaching is that it is a highly contextual act. Sermons are not just products that can be opened and reopened at various times and places; they come out of wrestling with Scripture in the context of real experiences with real people, real joys, struggles, challenges, and triumphs in mind.

All this is to say that it continues to feel a bit odd for me to be charged with the task of delivering a word from, or about God to people that I mostly do not know whose lives I mostly have no connection to, and who have no prior reason to grant me twenty-five minutes or so to speak into their lives. Preaching is very much an activity of a community.

Having provided all these qualifications and half-apologies, I must also say that I consider it a great privilege to worship with you here this morning. J and Andrea and their kids have been good friends of our family for four years now and we have recently enjoyed getting to know Andrew and Martha a bit as well. I hear many good things about this community and consider it an honour to be asked to preach here this morning.

My goal this morning is not to provide you with some wonderful new insight or approach to Scripture or anything like that. I know that you have many people in this community who are quite skilled at doing this. My goal is to share a bit of my own story alongside a bit of God’s story from Scripture. My hope is that something in what you hear today will touch down in your story...

SIGNS

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 Abbotsford, 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? 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 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.

WHAT KIND OF COMMUNITY?

The sign outside your church says "Highland *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 here in Abbotsford.

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 (Israel, the church) 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?" I think our text this morning, 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. It sounds good to say (and to hear), "You are all one."

GALATIANS: CONTEXT

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, deeply 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 the Jewish ritual of circumcision 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 temporary role of the law, the source of 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*.

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.

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 community—and a community 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.

AND US?

****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*.

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?

**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.

Someone to treat them like they belong here, with us, regardless of their age and their physical struggles. Someone to show them, in word and deed, the truth of Paul’s words to the Galatian church: “You are all one.”

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—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.

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.

CONCLUSION

Obviously I don’t live in Abbotsford and I don’t know the specific dynamics of your community. 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 are familiar enough with divisions and 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 Abbotsford.

May God help us to be the kind of people and places where all people—Jews, Gentiles, women, men, old, young, well, sick, rich, poor; the lonely, the weary, the frail and beaten down, the frightened, the confused, the bitter, the angry, the hopeless, and the doubting 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. May God help us to represent the oneness between people that *has come about* and is *already a reality* because of what he has done for us.

You are all one in Christ Jesus.

Thanks be to God.