

YOU ARE ALL ONE

GALATIANS 4:4-7
HOLYROOD MENNONITE CHURCH, EDMONTON
BY: RYAN DUECK
JUNE 16, 2013/4TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Introductory remarks...

It's great to be here among you today. I consider it a great privilege to worship with you here this morning.

I have enjoyed getting to know Werner and Joanne over the last few years, and we enjoyed having them down in Lethbridge a few months ago.

I have heard many good things about this church and consider it an honour to be with you this morning.

My goal this morning is not to provide you with some wonderful new insight or approach to Scripture or anything like that.

In fact, I suspect that you quite likely know far more about what it means to live out the truth of our text today than I do.

My goal today is a modest one. I simply want 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 can encourage you along in a path that I know that you are ***already*** walking.

SIGNS

About five years ago, when my wife Naomi and I were just coming out of seminary and looking for a job, we began to dialogue with a church on Vancouver Island called “Neighbourhood Church.”

We were instantly impressed with the openness and friendliness of the church, 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 didn’t like the ***name*** of the church.

As I said, I was about to graduate from seminary and my head swimming with precise doctrinal and denominational distinctives. 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 on Vancouver Island or in Edmonton, AB, or Timbuktu!—what that church believed, where they fit on the denominational spectrum, what kind of preaching, liturgy, music style, and prayers I might expect.

I liked signs like “Edmonton Presbyterian,” or St. John’s Anglican or “Lethbridge Mennonite Church, or any other simple representation of the beliefs of a congregation. I like clear definitions and categories.

The name “Neighbourhood Church,” at least initially, was not high on my list of clear and definitive names.

“Neighbourhood Church? What on earth does that mean?

What *kind* of church is it? A Baptist church? United? Christian Reformed? Pentecostal? Is it even a *Christian* church?

And what about the “neighbourhood” part?

Which neighbourhood? There are all kinds of different neighbourhoods in a given city, after all? Which one are we talking about?

So, neither part of the name—the “neighbourhood” part or the “church” part seemed to meet my criteria—both seemed hopelessly non-communicative, utterly lacking in precision and clarity, in my not very humble opinion 😊.

Or so I was inclined to think, until about a year into our time in Nanaimo.

About 15 minutes before a 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.

The next week, Naomi and I went to visit Walter and Iris.

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 church names...

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" one, they seem to have very little interest in the kind of theological 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 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 question for us, whether we live in Edmonton or Lethbridge or anywhere else on the planet 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.

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 from all around the world. 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.

There was a group of 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 should the kingdom community instituted by Christ look like? Is it defined by the usual markers and divisions that human beings are so good at inventing and protecting? Or is it something different?

This is what Paul was fighting for in the book of Galatians. This is why he comes across as a bit grouchy and antagonistic.

It is not external markers or ritual observances that justify us, say Paul; 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, and his rising for **all people**... his eventual return, and the overall pattern of his ministry and message in the world.... because of this man, 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!

“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.

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.

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. I'm sure you could add more items to it!

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.

In Luke 10:29 the Jewish expert in the law asks Jesus the famous question: "Who is my neighbour?"

It is 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” 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."

Walter and Iris came to our church for eighteen months or so before moving to a nursing home in a different city. They didn't come every Sunday, but they come when they could.

They sat off on the right side of the sanctuary, they struggled to see the words on a screen they couldn't really read, they listen to songs that they had never heard before and were probably too loud for their liking, they listened to prayers and a sermon that likely seem fairly foreign to them, and they generally went to a fair amount of effort to put themselves out there in a group of mostly strangers.

They decided to make Neighbourhood Church their church home. They took membership classes last fall, and were baptized!

And the church embraced them. We found them 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 was a war 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 Edmonton and I don't know the specific dynamics of your church here.

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 Lethbridge... and in Edmonton.

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 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.