

“One in Christ Jesus”
Galatians 3:23-29
Sunday, June 19, 2016
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

Happy Fathers Day! Aren't dads wonderful? Not all dads, of course; but if we happened to have a dad who wasn't the greatest, we are still supposed to respect our fathers, even if only for the fact that we wouldn't be here if it weren't for them. And, we can always be grateful for the men in our lives who have been like good fathers to us.

From my experience, the dads in my life have each had a great sense of humor. My own father, my father-in-law, my crazy husband who's a dad to my two boys. I'm going to trust, this morning, that the men in this congregation have a good sense of humor, too.

That being said, hear these comments that some folks have made about their fathers:

“They say when you die there's a light at the end of the tunnel. When my father dies, he'll see the light, make his way toward it, and then flip it off to save electricity.” -- Harland Williams

“My father listens to AM radio really loud. There's no reason for that. – Shashi Bhatia

“My dad's so cheap. He's always yelling at me for spending money. ‘Look at you, spending money, you're such a big shot.’ Oh, yeah, buying food, paying rent. I'm just showing off.” – Cathy Ladman

“Something happens when a man reaches a certain age, that The News becomes the most important thing in his life. All fathers think one day they're going to get a call from the State Department. ‘Listen, we've completely lost track of the situation in the Middle East. You've

been watching the news. What do you think we should do about it?”—Jerry Seinfeld

(from Joke Soup, comedian quotes):

For those of us who have good fathers, let’s remember to thank them today. For those of us who would wish for better fathers, let’s take comfort in the fact that God is a good Father who loves us more than any earthly father ever could. And there are many good men in the world who can be like fathers to us, whether our Dad was good or lousy.

Happy Father’s Day, dads! And Happy Father’s Day to all of you men among us, who have been and continue to be like fathers to us. We love you and we honor you.

Turning to our scripture topic, I want to begin by quoting Brenda Ueland.

I. Terminal Uniqueness

She once wrote: “Since you are like no other being ever created since the beginning of time, you are incomparable.” AnneWilson Schaef comments:

“When I read those words of Brenda Ueland, I take a deep breath and let it out very slowly. I am incomparable. Just letting myself truly know that elicits a feeling of awe and reverence...reverence for myself.

“In Twelve-Step circles there is a concept of ‘terminal uniqueness.’ One is terminally unique when one believes that no one else has had it so bad and that we are the center of the universe. When we insist in defining the world from our own perspective, we are operating out of terminal uniqueness. Terminal uniqueness erodes the soul.

“When we accept and celebrate our uniqueness, we take our place in the universe.”

(Anne Wilson Schaef, Meditations for Women Who Do Too Much).

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul points out that the uniqueness of Jew, Greek, slave, free, male and female is not meant to be a “terminal uniqueness.” The truth of God’s kingdom

on earth is oneness in Christ. After we have fully appropriated Christ's radical call to unity, then we can celebrate our uniqueness within that unity. Oneness comes first; true individual freedom grows out of that oneness.

It is difficult to believe that oneness in Christ Jesus is something that already exists. We do not see too much evidence of it in our world. It is much easier for us to think of examples of separation than of unity. Regional and international conflicts abound. Political differences pit folks against each other, both within the church and outside the church. Hatred and violence oppose love and gentleness in all spheres of life.

II. Slavery to Separateness

We need not look far to find conflict between people. Paul sees conflict in the churches he has established in Galatia. We see conflict in the church of today, as well.

That great actor and comedian, W.C. Fields, once said, "I am free of all prejudice. I hate everyone equally." I can relate. Can't you? Some days just make us feel that way, especially when we encounter a number of folks who irritate or annoy.

Paul limits his Galatian letter to Christians. He does not write to the whole society. He writes to the baptized, to Christians who have clothed themselves in Christ. Paul says that once someone is baptized into Christ they are not themselves anymore. Their old self dies as they are submerged in the waters of baptism. When they emerge from the waters they are a new person, clothed in Christ. They are no longer Jew. They are no longer Greek. They are no longer Black, White, Chinese, Guatemalan, or Navajo. First and foremost, they are Christian, clothed in Christ, carrying Christ's good news to the world.

The specific controversy for the Galatian church is circumcision. For the church today, we have other controversies. Whatever the controversy, Paul strikes at the heart of things. He

makes people angry wherever he goes. He's not afraid to challenge sacred cows; he's not afraid to talk about the big invisible elephant in the room.

Paul makes it clear that special requirements for Gentile Christians are wrong. Before Christ came, says Paul, the law was necessary to keep sinners in line. Now that Christ has come, his followers are immersed in his law of love, which transcends all other laws. Christ fulfills the law and makes it possible for all people to become children of God without the detailed burdens of Jewish law.

Therefore, once someone is baptized, they are one with all of us who have been baptized. Our oneness is in Christ, who unites all Christians through baptism.

This doesn't sound so great when you think about the people who call themselves Christians. Some would deny that you or I are Christians. You and I might prefer that some who call themselves Christians not do so. In my home church in Michigan, when I was growing up, the big debate was about speaking in tongues. The "tongues" faction said the other folks weren't Christian; the "non-tongues" crowd said the "tongues" folk weren't Christian. It got pretty ugly at times.

III. One in Christ

But according to Paul we are all stuck with each other through baptism, no matter how annoying people can be. We're not even talking about the rest of the world right now. We're just talking about other Christians. It's hard enough for us to get along. When we've accomplished that maybe we can be of more help in straightening out the rest of the world.

Think about it. "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ...all of you are one in Christ Jesus." You and me. We are one with Christians of all denominations and races and sexes and nationalities and political persuasions. In this election

season, how do you feel about Democrats or Republican? Libertarians or Green Party folks? Donald or Hillary? How do you feel about liberals or conservatives or Pentecostals or fundamentalists or Lutherans or Catholics? Or those Baptists up the road? Or that megachurch around the corner? What about those Mormons over there? Or the Seventh Day Adventists? Or the Jehovah's Witnesses? Do we reject folks because, in our view, they get the theology wrong?

Bad news, folks! They are baptized into Christ. We are one with them in Christ Jesus.

What about blacks, Hispanics, Asians, whites, Native Americans, Hungarians, Ukrainians, Arabs, Filipinos, Africans, Nicaraguans...? If they've been baptized, we are one with them.

And what about male and female? Men and women are often set at odds in our society, and men are set against men and women against women, too. We fight over what are the proper roles for the sexes. We battle each other for the scarce commodities we call wives and husbands and lovers and friends, and we battle over jobs and paychecks and prestige.

In Paul's discussion of circumcision, he claims that women are included in God's kingdom, just as Greeks are. Of course in our time we are aware of horrible accounts of female circumcision. But for Jews in Paul's time, circumcision is a male rite of passage. Even though, according to Paul, women cannot be circumcised, they are welcomed into Christian fellowship by means of their baptism. Baptism takes the place of circumcision as a sign of our covenant with God.

In Paul's radical understanding of the church, no one is excluded. All receive recognition as full members of the body of Christ. All are called to be children of God if they so choose. The only requirement is baptism.

Paul describes the oneness of baptism as a fact, not a dream for the future. God's

kingdom is proclaimed by Paul as a present reality. I like how one theologian says it: “The Kingdom of God is present wherever people are striving to make it present” (Herbert McCabe, Training for Transformation, p. 24).

Of course, Paul realizes that few are living according to kingdom reality. Nevertheless, God acts out of that truth. All are one in Christ Jesus, by God’s way of looking at things. All Christians have been clothed in Christ through baptism, so God does not see our distinctions. God sees our Christ-like-ness. If only we could see the Christ in others that God sees.

Ultimately, our unity in Christ comes from the leveling power of the gospel. Part of that power is an awareness of our equality in death. Through baptism we die to our former selves, as Christ died for us on the cross. We remember this death to our former selves, and we remember the death of our physical bodies which is to come. In death there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, all are one with Christ, who dies for all.

Likewise we are equal in new life. Through baptism we are born again, raised with Christ. We remember the new life we experience now as Christians, and the new life which will be ours in the future when we see Christ face to face.

Closing

“A high school principal urging graduates to go to college insisted that they should at least start college, and gave them a simple illustration. A very rough road ran from the school to the town. It was a dark night as he spoke to them but the principal explained that one does not need a great searchlight shining all the way to walk the road safely. All one needs is a very small light shining one step ahead. When that step is taken, the light moves up and reveals the next step. He was encouraging them at least to make a beginning. So it is with seeking to do God’s will. Most of us know what our next step should be. If we take that step, we will be delighted to

see the Lord's light moving along ahead of us!" (King Duncan)

Unity in Christ through baptism is a reality. God calls us to open our eyes to the light of that reality. If we recognize our oneness with other Christians, maybe we can move closer to understanding and accepting one another's differences. As Anne Wilson Schaef says, we can stop clinging to our terminal uniqueness. We can begin to see the Christ in others and the Christ in ourselves. Then we will truly be free as individuals. Living in that freedom, we can take another step, guided by the light of Christ. We can begin to seek unity for the world out of the unity we experience in Christ and His Church.

May God open our eyes to the reality of our oneness in Christ Jesus. May God break down all barriers that might separate us.

Amen.