

Sermon: June 19, 2016 – Galatians 3: 23-29
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

Today we have cause to celebrate.

- We celebrate Father's Day, and lift up the efforts of those Dads and Grandfathers who are doing their best to encourage, support and mentor the children entrusted to their care.
- This afternoon a member of this congregation gets to celebrate her retirement from Nursing after DECADES of saving lives.
- We celebrate the arrival of Summer tomorrow – and perhaps it will soon be as warm as it was in April - and we celebrate all that summer signifies – holidays from school and work, enjoying the outdoors, hiking, cycling, camping, kayaking, canoeing, gardening, tennis and golf, swimming at Quarry Lake, hot afternoons at a ballpark and warm summer nights on the patio.
- We celebrate the richness of indigenous culture this Tuesday with Aboriginal Day, a parade, crafts, activities and a mini Pow-wow.
- We keep hoping and praying for the arrival of our refugee family in Beirut, and the day they arrive in our town will truly be a day of celebration for all involved.

I, personally get to celebrate today, because being a Dad has been THE best thing that has ever happened to me. Rolling around on the floor with baby twins, throwing a ball around with a boy who knew what to do with a baseball bat from the first time he saw it, working at the same school that my children attended and having those great in-the-car conversations each day, stepping back as each of the three finds their place in the world as young adults, these things are incomparable and irreplaceable in making me who I am. And I get to be very proud of this congregation, and the decision made last week to actively pursue a staff position to discover the wants and needs of youth and young adults in our community, for that says that you have a heart not only for those people who are here, but for those who are not.

Whether you have come here today with a heavy heart or just ready to burst with celebration, each of you have things to celebrate on this day – beloved people in your life; hobbies, projects or interests that make you eager to face the day; perhaps your occupation; maybe an aspect of your faith. **I'd like you to spend one minute right now, sharing with the person beside you one thing that you celebrate or are thankful for on this day.**

As followers of Jesus Christ we get to celebrate every day, and today's reading from Galatians 3 reminds us why with these uplifting, expanding, life-opening words: (vv. 26-28, NIV)

in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith,²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

The Apostle Paul tells us that the things that isolate us from one another according to social norms have no power in our gathered life in Christ. Like the colours of the spectrum, which come together to produce dazzling white light, our trust in the good news of Jesus Christ brings us together in our diversity to make something rather amazing.

In this entire chapter of scripture, Paul is fending off the advances of deeply religious people who are concerned that this Jesus stuff is just too wide-open, too free, too expansive in its love. They liked the rules and rituals they used to live by, and indeed, following the rules is a lot more obvious way to show you "belong" to a religious community than more hidden things like the way you think and the words you speak, and the kindness and support you offer those who are on the outside looking in. They beg Paul to tighten things up, to give 'em that old-time religion.

Paul says no, and to make his point emphatically he probably speaks more harshly against the old ways than he would mean to. He writes, in the words of the NIV, (vv.23-25)

"Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed.²⁴ So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith.²⁵ Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian."

This image of the Law of Moses as something that binds or shackles us is pretty extreme, and Professor Alicia Vargas reminds us that elsewhere Paul clearly states how much he values the Jewish faith that both he and Jesus were raised with. The argument he makes is not against Judaism, but against rule-bound folks of any faith – in this case, Judaism – who are unable to step into the enormous freedom that God has declared for all of creation, in the liberating power of Christ.

He uses a great word, which we encountered at Bible Study last Friday, the word translated “guardian” by the NIV. I looked it up afterward at the Greek word is *paidagōgos*, a word that will ring a bell to the teachers in the crowd from the education term “pedagogy” which refers to the shape of one’s teaching practice. Other Bible translations render this word as “disciplinarian” (NRSV), “tutor” (The Voice), “schoolmaster” (KJV), “the one in charge of us” (Good News) or even “governess” (JB Phillips). Eugene Peterson (The Message) explains it like so: “The law was like those Greek tutors, with which you are familiar, who escort children to school and protect them from danger or distraction, making sure the children will really get to the place they set out for” and Alicia Vargas says “this one was usually a slave who guarded school children and kept them safe.” One way or another the implication is clear: Paul’s challengers think that there is danger in leaving the believers to their own devices. They should be guarded and directed and patronized as if they were children, and given clear rules to follow. By using the notion of a school guardian, Paul both acknowledges and gently chides their argument.

If I’m going to be perfectly honest, I don’t think that Paul’s opponents were 100% wrong, because religious beliefs are not entirely free-flowing and without shape. In any number of creative fields, there is a huge value to learning the classical skills in order to inform your creativity, so artists learn about three point perspective and the fine points of the colour wheel, contemporary dancers often have a basis in ballet training, authors rarely get very far without a deep familiarity of Dickens and Shakespeare and even the King James Bible.

In order to truly embody the love of Christ we need to be constantly learning about the faith, as children and as adults, both formal learning and paying attention to life as we live it. But there is a difference between learning the basics of faith so that it can unlock your best self in the creativity of Christ, versus learning something in a rigid, rule-bound manner that is only about obedience. Paul encourages us, as those incorporated into the body of Christ through the mystical sacrament of baptism, to put on Christ in the way that one would put on a baptismal tunic. We are not shackled by our faith, but it is definitely not to be invisible. My friends at Grace Baptist Church in Calgary have as their vision statement, “to live and love like Jesus” and that’s what this is all about, too: we let the power of faith transform us, so that none of the distinctions that matter so much to the world, matter at all to us. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, Neither protestant or catholic, neither slave nor free, Blue collar or white collar, nor is there male and female, Nor queer nor transgender, for we are all one in Christ Jesus. none of our categories separate us from one another when we really “get” Jesus.

When we really pay attention to the life of Christ, what he said and what he did, who he hung out with and who he denounced, we are challenged to a radical inclusiveness that goes way, way beyond mere tolerance. There are Christians who want to keep women in a subservient role, there are Christians who figure that the entirety of LGBTQ expression is an aberration, there are Christians who believe that everyone who lives outside a specific set of Christian doctrines have punched their ticket for hell - but when I look at the Jesus I follow I simply do not see any of that in his attitudes, his words, his actions.

In fact, in the aftermath of the heartbreaking loss of life at a gay nightclub in Orlando last weekend, I would suggest that the garment we put on when we put on Christ should probably look less like this (white baptismal tunic) and more like this (tie-died rainbow hippy tunic). Because honestly, I am sick and tired of “Christian” and “Religious” being taken as synonymous with “Judgmental” and “Violent” and “Ridiculous.” Paul tells us that we can be as different from one another as yellow is from purple, and still equally important to the spectrum that we call the Church. Jesus constantly picked the most edgy, out-there people to have meals with, while the deeply religious rule-monitors shook their heads and planned his demise. And on this day when Fathers get an extra gold star, I gotta stand up for my Lesbian daughter, and her twin who no longer identifies with a gender binary, and a son who is one of the gentlest inhabitants of God’s wonderful creation, and encourage the Church to break free of its self-imposed shackles and stand in complete solidarity with the LGBTQ community. As horrified as I was by the Orlando shootings, I have also been moved to tears by the bold statements of support by Muslim and

Christian leaders, denouncing the violence and standing in full, supportive solidarity with those who do not identify as heterosexual. For nearly thirty years the United Church of Canada has stood its ground on this matter, and I long for the day when we will have lots of companions on that ground. It's time for us to say that the love of Jesus demands inclusion, and love, and safe haven for all.

So we celebrate. As Christians we celebrate even in the midst of brokenness, because that's where life is lived. Life is not some exercise in growing perfection, in which some day we arrive at the place where we get all the steps right, living by every single one of the rules and get it all right and then enter into the loving arms of God the Father. No, life is that place where we step in potholes and puddles and stumble over our own two feet and twist our ankles, and love one another and accept God's total love for us in the midst of our clumsy brokenness. Amidst our own halting steps we reach out to those who have been told they're not good enough, not presentable, not welcome. As those who live with the spirit of Christ in our hearts and don the garment of Christ identifying us to the world, we enter the scariest places of life – the world of those who are dying, the world of those diminished by grief or shame or trauma, the world of those repressed by the powerful, the world even of our enemies – because that's what Christ's people do. We see the hardest realities of life and in the midst of that, celebrate the gift of life and the gift of Christ.

To quote a colleague in Ministry, Rev. Ray Goodship over in Cochrane, "wherever we go, whatever we do, God continues to be God." God our source and foundation is the love the infuses all of creation; the gifts of the holy spirit enable us to become active participants in sharing that love; and the one who has shown us so clearly what love looks like when it takes human form, Jesus Christ, shows us a path that is nothing short of amazing. Embrace that gift of faith and life, and live it with courage and joy. Amen.

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