

Sermon: June 26, 2022 – Galatians 3: 23-29
Rundle Memorial United Church, Banff AB: Rev Greg Wooley

When bad news & good news are intertwined, what do we *hear*?

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Seventeen years ago, when I was coaching my son's Little League baseball team, one of his teammates was a really athletic boy who was fairly new to baseball, and whose self-image was, shall we say, "a work in progress". As coaches, we were encouraged to help each child develop confidence at a number of different positions, including pitcher if they were so inclined, and I took it upon myself to work with this young lad.

As we did some basic warm-ups, his self-talk started to be said out loud. "I'm going to suck at this" was one of his refrains to which my replies were something like, "well, let's give it a try, you might really like it." We played catch for a bit, and he threw a nice consistent ball, hit the glove every time. I think he pleasantly surprised himself with how hard and accurately he was throwing. Then it was time for him to stand on the mound and test it out. I got down into the catcher's crouch behind home plate, and his first pitch came in: really fast, and right in the strike zone. Five more hard pitches, all strikes, interspersed with encouraging words from his coach/catcher. Then pitch number seven came in, low and outside; a ball rather than a strike. At which point he threw down his glove, stormed off the mound and shouted, "see, I told you I couldn't do this!" And that was that for his pitching career.

Clearly, there were a number of things going on here, and a visit with his parents revealed some of those. Yet there remains here a self-limiting that I have seen repeatedly through the years, all too frequently in my own responses. Whether we are still impacted by the legacy of a domineering parent who expected perfection... or dealing with a cognitive distortion that says that I am not entitled to make mistakes, even when in the midst of learning something... or perhaps just letting my inner Eeyore take over so that even the sunshine is a harbinger of rainclouds... there are times when that one negative event in the midst of many successes takes over the self-talk and simply will not be quiet. My sense that it may be even worse right now for many people, as our resilience and adaptability has been so stretched over these past two years.

Our scripture reading from Galatians is one in which something very positive can easily get overshadowed, so let me be perfectly clear about the good news that is found here, so good that it nearly glows: "in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith....²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus".

And no, I'm not going to race off to my next point, or offer a thought starting with "but" or "however", I'm going to read it again: "in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith....²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus". God in Christ wants us to embrace the oneness that is at the core of life on this planet, and because of that the categories that say who's in and out, the identifiers that determine who's on the top rung and who's holding the ladder for them, are *not even things* any more.

So whatever else we do with this reading from Galatians, we hold this in front of us. Any system designed to exclude, any effort to erect barriers, is false. ALL OF US ARE ONE, full stop.

We remember that these words were not just written “in general” for whoever might happen to read them. They were written by the Apostle Paul, to Churches, giving them the responsibility to be communities where this unifying love was put into action. Paul, writing to a collection of Churches in the ethnic or political region known as “Galatia”, was attempting to help them deal with some nasty divisiveness about privilege. In their young, just-developing faith communities there were many people who had just learned about Jesus and were excited about his words and actions and had disturbed their entire way of being so that they could connect with other people who also wanted Christ’s path to be their path. They were drawn to a God who did not place barriers between Christians based on whether they grew up Gentile or Jewish, a God who did not say that free people were better than the enslaved, a God who did not reserve power for males over other genders. This inclusiveness was immensely attractive, to those who had repeatedly been ostracized or demeaned, and to those who held some social status who recognized that to embrace the commandment to love one’s neighbour as oneself, meant loving ALL those neighbours.

Yet, as always seems to happen, when patriarchy and privilege are challenged, there were those who thought otherwise and they felt so strongly about it that they travelled from town to town making sure that none of this “equality” stuff got out of hand. Convinced that a Gentile couldn’t be a Christian without first passing through all that was needed to claim Jewish identity, they opposed Paul for spreading such thoughts, challenging his authority to speak such rubbish. So when you see Paul, here and elsewhere, writing things that appear to be anti-Judaism, even Antisemitic, that’s not what’s going on. What he is anti-, is anti-privilege. His roaming opponents want to make sure that none of these newcomers to the faith think they can just walk in and think they are as important and beloved as anyone else. Paul says: sorry, opponents, if you understand Christ at all you’ll know you are dead wrong.

In Christ, everyone is beloved. Each of us has within us the very essence of God. As a Church, a community of faith that desires to have the heart of Christ Jesus at its heart, we are to be a community of radical welcome and delight, embracing and celebrating the various gifts and experiences of the newcomer and the long-timer. Robert Schnase, in his book *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (pp.11-12), [the practices are Radical hospitality; Passionate worship; Intentional faith development; Risk-taking mission and service; Extravagant generosity] defines the practice of radical hospitality as “the active desire to invite, welcome, receive, and care for those who are strangers so that they find a spiritual home and discover for themselves the unending richness of life in Christ. It describes...an outward focus...that motivates church members to openness and adaptability, a willingness to change behaviours in order to accommodate the needs and receive the talents of newcomers.” And in case we think this still assigns the role of “gatekeeper” to those who are already here, Schnase adds these important words: “Beyond intention, hospitality practices the gracious love of Christ, respects the dignity of others, and expresses God’s invitation to others, not our own....By practicing hospitality, we become part of God’s invitation to new life, showing people that God in Christ values them and loves them.”

What’s important to note here, in these words from Robert Schnase and the words Paul wrote to the Galatians, is that neither of them imagine a homogeneous group, with everyone being an identical shade of beige. In saying that there is no Jew or Gentile, no free or slave, no male or female, Paul is not suggesting that everything that makes us unique or delightful should be ignored as if they don’t exist. What he is saying, is that we quit developing hierarchies of “better than” or “lesser than.” Your gender identity or ethnicity might be extremely important to your self-understanding, so bring that. Your love of nature or literature,

your gifts of music, your ability to create things with your hands might be very much at the heart of your connection to God, so bring that. If you have challenges, including mobility challenges, bring those as well and it will be up to us as Church to figure it out with you, with creativity and grace. We have many differences, and that is a good thing, and we are called to live into a reality where none of it, neither the presence of something nor the absence of something, diminishes your sense of belonging, and your ability to participate as fully as you want to. Whether you're new to religious thought or feel pretty sophisticated in your beliefs, whether you see yourself as a person of deep, tested faith or couldn't even define what that means, are invited to join in a shared journey. In Church, in community, in the world, the intention of the Divine is for unfettered beloved belonging.

There is so much more to be said about the call to live in more inclusive ways: about the need to ensure that there is space for those who have not traditionally been heard to be heard, and to be heard first; about our common call to actions of love, peace and justice - including acts of opposition, as we see in our brothers and sisters south of the border in response to the unconscionable overturning of *Roe v. Wade* - which are to be hallmarks of the gathered community and its members; about the role of reconciliation and restitution and reparation to those who have been demeaned, and excluded, and stigmatized by the Church. Those are all important components of our calling. So is an ongoing evaluation of any sense of "we" and "they", or "inside" and "outside" – remembering that in all of this, ALL of us – the brand-new and the here-for-decades – are responding to God's invitation, to Christ's desire to infuse everything that we say and do an inclusive love founded in justice. The agenda, is God's.

Knowing that all those things are implicit in this journey, I want to bring us back to the core proclamation that Paul made to the Churches in Galatia: "in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith....²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus". None of the put-downs, none of the enforced divisions, none of the privilege, nothing rooted in the lie of intrinsic superiority have a place in the household of God. What is true, is love. What is true, is knowing that you are beloved and so is that person in the next pew and that person wandering down Banff Avenue. What is true, is the holy delight at the things that make us diverse and colourful and quirky and weird. In the midst of negative self-talk, in the midst of troubling trends in the world, we are called to reconnect with one another, with the needs of the earth, with the call of the Divine to be shaped and defined by LOVE.

In the name of Christ, who calls us to lower the walls and lengthen the table, may inclusive and non-judgmental love infuse our togetherness and inspire our reach into the world. Amen.

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