

Knowing Your Family

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January 7, 2018

Galatians 3:26-28 — For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 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.

This passage in Galatians 3 is one of my favorite passages in all of Scripture. In these few verses, the Apostle Paul is telling us, with clarity and conviction, who we are as Christians, as members of the Church. In Christ, we are all beloved children of God through faith. In Christ, we have been baptized, welcomed into the Body of Christ, and just as the Spirit descended like a dove when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, so the Spirit has descended on us and dwells in us now. The voice from Heaven that spoke over Jesus in our first reading—“You are my child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased”—that same voice speaks that same truth over each of us, every day.

In these few verses of Galatians 3, Paul’s message is, above all, a message of unity. We are *all* children of God through faith, and all of us are *one* in Christ Jesus. That sounds pretty good, right? Unity is something that we can all get behind, a principle that we can all affirm. It is good, we would all agree, for members of the Body of Christ to be united, and therefore it is good for us to strive for unity. But that’s a very general statement, isn’t it? The hard part isn’t agreeing on whether or not unity, in abstract, is a good thing for the Church; no, the hard part is agreeing on what unity *means* for the Church and what it requires in specific situations. So, we’ve got to ask some tough questions, like “How different can we be from each other while still being united? What differences are acceptable in the Body of Christ, and what differences are not? Are there any other virtues, besides unity, that may at times take precedence over unity? For example, might there be a time when the Body of Christ should sacrifice unity for the sake of justice, or truth, or something else?” We all agree that we should strive for unity within our Christian family, but actually doing so can be more complicated than we’d like it to be. That’s how families usually are, right? More complicated than we’d like them to be.

In our second reading, Paul doesn’t shy away from the tough questions. He gets specific about what unity means in the Church. “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.” Now, what does all that mean? Well, we have three pairings here. The first, “Jew or Greek,” is about ethnicity—cultural and religious background. Remember, Paul was a Jew, and Jesus was a Jew, and many of the earliest Christians were Jews. What’s more, many of these early Jewish Christians believed that Christianity should retain its Jewish cultural roots. So, if people who were not Jews wanted to become Christian, they would have to embrace Jewish customs and follow Jewish law—from not eating certain foods to men getting circumcised. If you read any of Paul’s letters in the Bible,

you'll see that Paul was *not* a fan of this perspective. Whenever Paul writes about people who are not Jews, he usually uses the term "Gentiles," but every once in a while, he uses the term "Greeks," as he does here in Galatians 3. Mind you, he doesn't mean people from the land of Greece; he just means people who have adopted Greek culture—and since the ancient Greek empire, before the Roman empire, used to cover the whole region of the Mediterranean and beyond, Jews could easily refer to most of the non-Jews around them as "Greeks." All that goes to say: in this first pairing, Paul is talking about, on the one hand, people from his own cultural and religious background of Judaism—which, at the time, was the privileged background in Christianity—and, on the other hand, people from other cultural and religious backgrounds.

The second pairing, "slave or free," is about class and wealth. In Paul's day, there were many different ways to become a slave (including being too poor to pay off your debts), and there were many different situations that slaves could be in—some more desirable, others less desirable. But in general, slaves had far fewer economic and social resources than citizens did, and slaves they were both viewed and treated as a lower class, a lesser kind of people. The same was true for Paul's third and final pairing, "male and female." As you all know, throughout both ancient and modern history, men have believed themselves to be inherently superior to women, and a host of unjust laws and customs have been built on that belief.

But here, in Galatians 3, Paul is telling us that, in Christ Jesus, there is no longer male and female, no longer slave or free, no longer Jew or Greek. In other words, the Body of Christ dissolves our hierarchies of ethnicity and culture, class and wealth, sex and gender. In the Body of Christ, we are compelled to let go of such hierarchies, for in God's eternal reign, these distinctions don't matter. As Paul writes, we are all children of God through faith, and all of us are one in Christ Jesus.

Now, of course, these distinctions still exist in our world, and these hierarchies are manifested every day. What's more, we the Church are charged with resisting those hierarchies, both in the world and in our own communities of faith. Because, friends, our unity, our shared identity as God's children, *requires* equality. These verses teach us that, so long as we privilege certain people, or belittle certain people, on the basis of ethnicity, culture, class, wealth, sex, or gender—so long as that's the case, the Body of Christ cannot be truly united. Only when we value *every* child of God, whatever their identity, whatever their background—only then will we be the family that God is calling us to be.

One of my pastoral colleagues, Rev. Lillian Daniel, tells a story about a woman in her church who had a very long, slow recovery from a stroke. Rev. Daniel writes, "Church people visit [this woman], and she can speak to us in ways that indicate she knows exactly who we are, and has known us for years, but [because of the stroke] she cannot speak anybody's name. Instead she pulls out the church photo directory. ... When one of us from the church walks in...she waves [it] at us, as if to say that she does not know our names, but she knows the way in which we are all related. She may have forgotten our names, but she knows us as we truly are."

Friends, let us ask ourselves: Are we able to enthusiastically wave that church directory at *every* member of God's family? Are we prepared to live as kindred in the one Body of Christ with people of every identity and background? Are we ready to joyfully unite ourselves with people who are homeless? People whose accents we struggle to understand? People whose immigration status we are unsure of? People whose gender expression doesn't fit into our boxes of what a "normal" man or woman should be like?

As we partake of this sacrament today, friends, let us recommit ourselves to striving towards Paul's vision in Galatians, to striving for both unity and equality within the Body of Christ. May the Spirit help each of us to grow more and more into the truth that we are all children of God through faith. Amen.