



SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

JUNE 23, 2019

GALATIANS 3: 23-29

“DOES IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?”

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore, the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, 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. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.

- In the summer of 1970, I followed my college girlfriend to where she lived in Silver Spring, Maryland outside Washington DC. Perhaps you remember your late adolescent love that led you to do stupid things like move to another city for a summer, live with a bunch of friends in a rental house, and work whatever job you could find just to tend to the flutters of your heart.
- My girlfriend’s father managed a Sears delivery warehouse, so that was my summer job. Delivering washers, dryers, refrigerators, and stoves in the District of Columbia. When I walked into the warehouse the first day with my girlfriend’s father, a gregarious Irishman, I was face-to-face with the reality that I was the only white guy among about fifty black men. They were standing around the border of the warehouse walls looking less than excited about my arrival. In fact, they looked downright hostile. It wasn’t just that I was a young white dude with long hair and a moustache. I was their boss’ daughter’s boyfriend. The word was already out.
- I walked in silence alongside two large black men to a loaded delivery truck and squeezed between them in the truck cab.
- You could cut the tension with a knife which I figured might end up in my back.
- “So, you’re datin’ the boss’ daughter?”
- “Yep.”

- “Listen. We’re not supposed to take tips, but we do. You alright with that?”
- “As long as you cut me in.”
- They relaxed a bit.
- “Sometimes we stop at the end of a long day and have one before we head in. You good with that?”
- “Yep.”
- They relaxed a bit more.
- They watched me for a week or so. And, when they split the tips with me that first day, I was as liable to be fired as they were. Then we had our first beer. The word got around that I was cool....
- It was hard work. Carrying heavy appliances up and down narrow staircases was not easy or simple work. We had to have one another’s backs, literally. So, i also earned their trust with my sweat.
- Mr. Muldoon never knew a thing from me about tips or about a beer at the end of a hot, humid DC summer day.
- But, at the end of the day, we were left with our differences and similarities.
- I was still a white college student from a suburb of Columbus, Ohio working a summer job. These men were of a different race, from the District of Columbia likely working their permanent job. Different backgrounds, different cultures.
- We shared hard work, the feeling of sweat rolling down our backs and brows, a similar joy over getting a nice tip, a familiar annoyance at some nasty customer, a shared interest in sports, soul music, the taste of a cold beer.
- These realities were held in tension. The differences and the similarities....

- Within a faith community like ours, the differences and similarities between us as individuals are meant to be transcended by our identity as one in Christ, children of God, united in a vision of ministry and purpose as our expression of the body of Christ.
- Transcend means to go beyond the limits. Transcend means to overcome the negative or restrictive aspects of our humanity.
- This is the Christian vision.
- Paul first speaks of this vision by referring to the law. Paul sees the law as a framework that both guards in a positive way and imprisons in a negative way.
- Guards by providing boundaries for people in community: don't steal. Don't be envious of what your sister or brother has. Don't do violence to one another. Observe a day of rest. Honor your parents.
- Yet imprisons because the boundaries inevitably become ways to judge and divide us from each another. This is what all religious rules and laws ultimately do: provide means by which we contrast and compare ourselves with one another. We judge. And judgment causes separation.
- According to Paul, the law of God functions as a school bus driver getting us safely to the school of Jesus Christ so that we can then leave the law behind and begin functioning at a higher level without all the categories and divisions.
- So, the law is elementary school. Following Jesus is graduate school.
- Paul gives us the major categories that divides and separates people in his day: slave and free. Jews and gentiles. Men and women.
- In our day, divisions persist in congregations and in the broader church—running along lines of ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation, political affiliation, and more.
- In my first congregation full of long-standing families and clans—one of the oldest congregations in Virginia—people began retiring into the area from Washington DC. These were professional people, unlike the farmers and factory workers in the

congregation. The congregation struggled with divisions along education, social standing, and life experience.

- How does a retired CIA agent who worked countless countries overseas and a third-generation farmer who hasn't traveled outside the state find common ground?
- **In Paul's vision, all human divisions are to be ultimately irrelevant to our primary identity as members of the body of Christ....**
- The larger culture today has very little common ground. The divisions are deadly. The chasm between the alt-right and progressive left appears enormous. Even families have been torn apart by their political differences.
- The church—the local congregation—CLC—is meant to be a beacon for the culture on how to recognize the differences and similarities, grow beyond them, recognizing not only our common humanity, but our common kinship in Christ.
- Any attempt to categorize and label one another in a congregation and diminish one another on the basis of those categories and labels is a sign of spiritual immaturity. A sign that we are still in elementary school.
- I have yet to lead a congregation where the members have transcended the divisions by more highly valuing their identity as children of God than their categories and labels.
- I certainly am willing to admit I may not have been mature enough myself to lead a congregation into this maturity, but I invite us to make the effort just to see what the experience might be like. I imagine it would be quite enlivening and healing for all involved....
- Since about the eighth grade, I have played in any number of bands with black and white musicians. Color never made one bit of difference. We transcended the limits. We transcended the negative aspects of race and culture.
- In a few minutes, we will play the sermon song. Let's see, we have a black drummer who is not a member; yours truly, the old white man; Pat Bauer, a white woman, and Vincent Beatty, who none of us had met until 8:45 this morning. He will be joining us in the Saturday Night Band. Jason can't be here this morning and he is a newer member.

And you know Michael Wach who has been playing with us, who is not a member, either. But, we don't care.

- While we're playing, I can guarantee you that Pat doesn't think "Why is Vincent playing this morning? He's not even a member."
- Troy isn't thinking, "Who the heck is that honkey playing piano?"
- I'm not thinking, "I wonder if Jason has been a member long enough to join the band," or "Michael better join if he wants to continue playing."
- Why not?
- Because we transcend our differences and similarities for the sake of the song. We are lost in the music. We are attuned to one another so that we transcend the categories and divisions in order to play as a unit. One band. One song. United to communicate in music and lyrics for your sake.
- We are modeling transcendence every Sunday.
- The differences fall away in our communication as we rehearse. I'll tell Pat to sing louder. Jason will ask me about a chord I missed putting in the chart. I'll tell the band to play softer at one point. They'll tell me to mic the piano. Pat will tell Jason a string is sharp or flat. Troy will ask me how the heck I chose the song. We are straight with one another. The differences and similarities drop away for the sake of the song.
- We're supportive and complimentary. When Pat or Michael or I sing. Troy's a great drummer. Always right there in the pocket. Jason anchors things for us so solidly. And we don't go behind one another's backs.
- We transcend for the sake of the song.
- This is how a congregation is meant to be: we transcend the differences and similarities for the sake of Jesus Christ and for the sake of the larger mission of why we are here. We get lost in the spirit. Color, income, length of membership, education, class, gender, sexual orientation, everything transcended for the sake of being united in Christ Jesus.
- And every time is it not, we fail at being who Christ wants us to be....

- It's that simple.
- I urge you to make the following small change in your thinking and in your speech.
- The change is this:
 - CLC is first and foremost **the Congregation of Jesus Christ**
 - Then second, CLC is **our** congregation
 - Then, third, CLC is **my** congregation
- Catch yourself if you ever speak of what "they are doing" or the decision "they made," as if "they" does not include you. Being faithful to Paul's vision means there is no "us and them." There is no "we--they."
- We are united in a vision as the people of Jesus Christ.
- United in it being **our** congregation. A human community transcending divisions and categories.
- SERMON SONG: **WHITE MAN'S WORLD** BY JASON ISBELL AND THE 400 UNIT