

Sermon, June 19, 2022  
Galatians 3:23-29

“In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek”

Our reading this morning begins with Paul’s assertion that we are justified, not by the law, but by our faith - although it is more correct to say we are justified by grace which we accept through faith, and it is through such faith that we find ourselves “in Christ”, which Paul says makes us children of God. I’ll come back to that.

Galatians is a letter written to a congregation that was in conflict, and a major part of that conflict is found in verse 28 when Paul writes that “There is no longer Jew or Greek” in Christ Jesus. To understand this, first, be aware that in this context the word ‘Greek’ does not refer specifically to people from Greece. Rather, it means Gentiles, i.e., people who are not Jewish. Secondly, keep in mind that the early church was made up of Jews who had chosen to follow Jesus Christ and Gentiles who had chosen the same, which led to conflicts concerning matters of the law. For example, the Jewish Christians were insisting that the male Gentiles in the congregation must be circumcised. But Paul argues that all are justified by faith, and that all who are “in Christ” are the offspring of Abraham. Thus, in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Gentile - all are one in Christ. Looking at the verse in its entirety we come to understand that “Being in Christ does not do away with Jew or Greek, male or female, even slave or free, but it makes these differences before God irrelevant.” (Cougar) in the 10th chapter of the Book of Acts, Peter says, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with, or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.” This points to a more open attitude in the early church, but which would be rather short lived in the history of the church.

Today, we may not fully appreciate what a radical statement it was to say that there is neither male nor female! Remember that it was a very patriarchal society in which women were essentially seen as property and were in no way the equal of men. Jesus was also very radical in his rejection of that. Consider, as an example, his conversation with the Samaritan women at the well. In that conversation Jesus was breaking two taboos. First, the Samaritans were not someone you associated with, and second, a man did not talk to a woman he was not related to, especially in public. Also, know that the early church had a more open attitude towards women, including having women in positions of leadership. Unfortunately, that attitude was also very short lived!

Today is the holiday known as Juneteenth, a celebration of the official end of slavery - although let’s not fool ourselves into thinking that slavery no longer exists in this country. It’s just called by another name - human trafficking! But it is also appropriate on this day to recognize

what has been called “America’s original sin” (Wallis), which includes not only slavery, but the genocide of Native Americans - and that it is always the right time to address the sickness that still grips this country, namely, racism and all other forms of hate and prejudice, including antisemitism, anti-Asian violence, homophobia, and religious intolerance. And, so, today it is imperative that we extend Paul’s statement, saying that ‘in Christ there is no black or white, no brown, yellow or red, no gay or straight - and that the designation ‘children of God’ reaches beyond members of the church’.

We are currently living in a time when the practice of exclusion has spread rapidly both here and abroad - “often to the point that the mere fact of being different - of belonging to a different religion, a different race, a different ethnic group, or a different nation - is enough to make a person the target of vilification and violence.” There is a growing fear of ‘otherness’, meaning that there are those who feel threatened by those who are different from themselves. And a very sad part of this is that a lot of this is taking place in churches, again, here and abroad. As Christians we have to re-embrace the fact that we are one in Christ, but also reach beyond the church recognizing our common humanity with all of God’s children, i.e., all who are created in the image of God. As Martin Luther King once wrote, “There is a need for individual religions to realize that God has revealed Himself to all religions and there is some truth in all.”

As Christians we believe that there is but one God, yet we have to accept that that one God is not the sole possession of the church, and that, “the belief in one God and the affirmation of common humanity and equal dignity belong together.” (Volf) In God we are all one. To say that is not to deny the value of difference. In the words of theologian Miraslov Volf, “...each being shares equally in common humanity, but each is human in a unique way.”

As the French say, ‘Vivi la difference!’ Speaking from my own experience - for a good part of my life I have lived in neighborhoods where the residents were different from me in various ways. In New Haven I lived in a neighborhood that was made up primarily of African Americans and Hasidic Jews. In Flushing I lived in one of the most diverse neighborhoods in the country - diverse racially, ethnically, and religiously, and looking back, the experience did not have a negative impact on my life. Quite the contrary! It was one of the best experiences of my life, having the opportunity of knowing people from around the world, seeing the world through different eyes, and not only seeing the differences, but, most importantly, recognizing the similarities- coming face to face with our common humanity!

Hatred of the other, those who are different from ourselves, only diminishes our own humanity. As Christians, as children of God, we cannot look the other way, but, instead, stand firm against all forms of bigotry and hate - but in a way that does not return hate for hate, which would only diminish ourselves. In the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The hour calls for moral grandeur and spiritual audacity!" For us Christians this means that we not fight hate with more hate, but that we seek reconciliation and embrace - that we fight with the most powerful weapon at our disposal - the power of love! Amen.

**Let us pray:** Gracious Lord, ever loving and kind, as always, we extend our gratitude for this day that you have given us and ask that in your wisdom we make the best of it we can. Lead us, through the example of your Son, Jesus, to meet the challenges of our day with faith and with hope, knowing that your Holy Spirit is with us every step of the way. We especially ask that you give us the strength and courage to stand firm against the evil of racism and bigotry, and to seek to embrace the common humanity we share with all of your children. Help us to embrace the differences that enrich our lives and celebrate all that we share in common with our fellow human beings. We pray not only for greater unity within the Body of Christ, but, also, for greater understanding and respect between all who know you within their own traditions and religions.

On this Juneteenth we celebrate the official end of slavery, while also praying for those whose freedom has been stolen from them - and look to you to help bring an end to human trafficking.

On this day we also celebrate the lives of those we call father - thanking you for the blessing they have been in our lives - and, also remembering to you all for whom this is a day of sadness as well as one of bright and happy memories.

We lift up before you all who are in need of your healing love - those who are lonely, those who feel broken and yearn for wholeness, as well as those who are sick, and those who are dying, remembering to you.... amen.