

An Alarming Statement
from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Reading: Galatians 3:23-29

Date: June 20, 2010, Father's Day

This is a difficult text, largely because it makes a declaration that we would just as soon not have to deal with. Paul is claiming to the church at Galatia that all of God's people are ONE by faith. Not because of their adherence to the law but by their profession of faith in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Paul is saying that the time for using the law as the arbiter of who's in and who's out is a thing of the past. Now, after the coming of Christ, he is saying, it is enough that one professes faith in Christ. It is enough, that is, to make one part of the family of God, the church. It is a new day, he is telling the Galatians. It is a sign of that inclusiveness that is yet to come, in the new age, the eschatological time, the age of the last things when Christ actually returns. For the time being, he is saying, you have a glimpse of the kingdom and it is an inclusive community.

They don't like it. They prefer a church that operates like a club with membership standards and like-minded fellows-well-met, who know the rules and follow them in order to be socially

accepted. A club can do this but Paul is not convinced that the church can. It doesn't mean that the church has no standards of conduct, no civility, no rules to live by (consider our Presbyterian Book of Order, for example). It does mean, however, that we no longer have license to exclude anyone on the basis of gender or color or race or class or ethnic origin or religious belief, or, or, or... You get the idea. The church is not a club. It operates by a different order and that order, that calling is of none other than God.

So, it is here, in the Letter to the Galatians, that we read Paul's declaration that there is no exclusiveness about the church. All are one in Christ: the Jew, the Greek, the Gentile, the Muslim, slave, the free, the male and the female, and so forth. You get the idea. You may not entirely like it, any more than the Galatians did, but there it is for us to ponder and allow to get under our skin and worm its way into our minds as it keeps us awake at night, this disturbing declaration. It especially outraged the Jews in Galatia who, up until Paul came along, had an exclusive on the membership committee at the new synagogue, i.e. the church in Jerusalem or Galatia or Rome or wherever.

There are several nuances to a declaration like this one of Paul. Progressive Christians will find themselves saying, "Go, Paul. You tell 'em. It is the truth of God that all should hear: No longer is there Jew nor Greek, etc."

There will be others who are still not comfortable with this declaration and will look for ways to find it wanting, especially in its lack of adherence, in their view, to the Law of God. They are like the members of every presbytery I have ever been a part of who

have special questions of each new candidate for ministry or persons already in ministry who are transferring into that particular presbytery. They ask questions that go something like this: “Tell us your views on the doctrine of the atonement (or trinity, or predestination, etc.). There is, in their mind, only one correct answer and it is the one they adopted years ago. Fail to use their words and definition and you’re dead meat in their view. You will not get into their presbytery if they can rally the votes against you. More than one minister has been sent home with his hat in his hands to tell the presbytery that ordained him that he will not be allowed to join the presbytery of his new call because they have differed over a theological detail. No wonder Mark Twain said that “Man is the only animal that blushes; or needs to”.

There is yet another nuance to this disturbing declaration of Paul to the Galatians. It is a more subtle but, nevertheless important, dimension of this affirmation that we are one in Christ by faith. This dimension raises the question of “What kind of Christian will you be?” rather than “Will you be welcomed as a member of the body of Christ?” This nuance of Paul’s declaration brings us back to practice and behavior and judgment and witness. It is, in our modern era, arguably the most difficult interpretation of Paul’s declaration to make.

We begin by stating again that: “All are one in Christ: there is neither Jew nor Greek, male or female, slave or free.” But then we hear the question raised, “Then what about the faithful person who uses bad judgment? Do we just ignore that behavior that many among us consider problematic?” It is a good and important question because it is the key to the door through which we enter

when we move in to examine carefully what this member of Christ's church is saying, and how he says it; or doing among us, causing questions about the way she lives as a Christian. Let me give you a couple of examples.

A number of years ago I was attending a theology conference at Montreat, the Presbyterian conference center in Western North Carolina. The featured speaker was a well-known theologian who was smart, articulate and progressive. He also swore like an adolescent who has just discovered the power of words to keep adults out of his life. It was so pronounced that by the end of the second day of morning lectures a delegation of pastors and laity attending the conference raised a question about his language and said they found it offensive and unnecessary to make his point. He listened and asked a few questions and then said something else which I have forgotten. But the upshot of it all was that he stopped using the offensive language. What was it St. Paul said about our behavior? It was something to the effect that, "If my words or behavior offends my brother I will alter my words and behavior".

You see, here the issue is not "Is this person a member of the body of Christ, the family of God?" Of course he is. No doubt about it. He is one with us and we are all one with Christ. But does that mean I have to sit through three more days of lectures listening to him take the Lord's name in vain along the way to using scatological language that seems to declare the man has a limited vocabulary? I don't think I have to do that and so I may exercise my right to walk out of the lecture and give the lecturer a less than favorable review.

One of our friends who teaches homiletics at one of our seminaries has told her students, “Never give them a reason to reject what you are saying.” In other words, the truth of God is far too important to be lost before it reaches the third pew because you look like you haven’t had a bath in a month or your language is not PG rated or your clothing was formerly the skin of bear. Just because John the Baptist wore animal skins and ate wild honey for his exclusive diet and lived in a cave doesn’t mean we have to. John may not have had a choice. We do and it is incumbent upon us to exercise that choice with sensitivity and wisdom and good judgment. Just because my parish is out in horse country doesn’t mean I need to ride ol’ Dobbin on all my pastoral calls and preaching assignments at neighboring churches because John Wesley did. Wesley didn’t have a choice. We do. How are we going to choose and what criteria for judgment will we use? It is a more timely question than we may think it is.

You and I, as members of the body of Christ, make decisions and judgment calls every day. They affect the way we decide about who is to be our next best friend or in whom we will confide or who will be our spouse or partner. All of these are judgment calls that are influenced by experience and needs and interests and values. They are not exclusivistic by nature. They are not grounded in prejudice or ignorance or feelings of superiority. They have more to do with common pursuits and how we want to spend our time with others. I may have acquaintances that play computer games morning, noon and into the night but that doesn’t mean I’m obligated to like computer games or even to think that playing them is a good use of my time. You may know people who think the

roller derby is great sport but that doesn't mean that you want to spend time going to the roller derby every weekend.

We make judgments about people, some say in the blink of an eye, within the first few minutes of meeting them. At best these judgments help us determine who we want to live with and work with and play with and, yes, even worship with. These are judgment calls that take us into other realms of understanding that person, often with surprising results. Jesus was a master at choosing the "least of these", the ones no one else wanted anything to do with, the ones who were the least politically correct, the outcasts, the lame, the poor, the unattractive and the sick. He put them up before his disciples and before the power structure and he said, "You cannot ignore this person nor can you treat him as though you are looking through him. Look at him. Accept him. He is a child of God, just as you are. That is the point of those encounters when Jesus puts the tax collector, the lame man with sores, the poor widow with two coins before us. He isn't saying, "Become like them, dishonest, ridden with disease, pitifully poor." He is saying to us, "See this person for who and what he/she is: a person loved of God who is redeemed, healed, made whole again, just as you are. What you have in common is Christ and the salvation that Christ provides. You may have many differences of background and interests, visions and pursuits. Don't let those matters get in the way of your seeing this person as God does: a member of the family of faith.

Just as we often disappoint God by our behavior and our judgment and our choice of words, so those we meet along the way do also. I know I have done plenty "to bring God to a pitiable

condition”, which is a pretty good definition of sin, and so does the egocentric teenager, the insensitive husband, the adulterous wife, the unfair employer. We have our human sin in common, don’t we? But we also have our redeemed condition in common, complete with the glorious new life of a forgiven sinner who now must make decisions about the best ways to live as one of God’s little ones, as Luther liked to call us Christians. It means living responsibly, making judgments, living prudently, forgiving as we have been forgiven and, perhaps most important, defining self. Then others are enabled to decide if they want to be associated with us and what we stand for or not. A part of being a member of the family of faith is declaring what you believe and witnessing to that truth. Some will decide to join with you in your way of being a disciple of Christ while others will take another path and make their witness in another way. One isn’t necessarily better than another for we are all one in Christ. But they are often very different witnesses to the same truth. Our lives are filled with making choices about the way we will witness. Choose carefully. Someone is watching and listening.

Thanks be to God.