

This morning we continue our reading of Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia, a letter which we call Galatians. This is the 4th week of our 6 weeks reading through the majority of this letter. We have learned over the previous few weeks that Paul writes this letter to a group of non-Jewish Christians, or Gentiles, who are wondering if they have to become Jewish in order to become Christian. They are wondering if they have to abide by Jewish laws and customs to be welcomed into a relationship with Christ.

Today we are going to read a piece of the letter which is quoted a lot. It is usually quoted whenever there is a church conflict concerning who should be welcomed and who should be excluded from church leadership. It is a great text to read today on a day that we baptized two young men and welcomed another into church membership. Today I invite us to hear these words from Paul with an open mind and heart.

Read Galatians 3: 23-29

The young men who were baptized today might have felt some fear and anxiety as they anticipated today. But let me put today in context for you and for the rest of us. In our scripture today, Paul mentions about how baptism is about being "clothed in Christ." Do you know what that phrase "clothed in Christ" means in relation to baptism?

The phrase "clothed in Christ" refers to how people were baptized in the Bible. A person who was to be baptized would have come to the river or to a baptismal pool, taken off their clothes until they were naked, then they would have gone into the river or pool, been baptized in the river or pool, then they would have come out of the river, still naked, and put on a new set of clothes. You think baptism was uncomfortable today? Imagine having to do it naked? But that is how baptisms were done.

We stodgy Presbyterians never ask anyone to take off their clothes for baptism. Thank goodness. But Paul in his words to the Galatians does point out that baptism is a sign that being in relationship to Christ makes one a new person. Your old self is to be discarded and your new self is to be taken on.

What does that look like? In our first lesson this morning that Kathy read, it means that demonic forces do not have control over us. The man from Gerasene was controlled by demons. But Christ was able to show that the demonic forces that we think are so powerful really are not.

These demonic forces can be cast off into a heard of pigs. Those demonic forces which we may battle like addictions do not have to control us. Baptism is a sign for us that those demonic forces are not as powerful as the transforming power of Christ.

In the words that we read this morning from Paul, the author also recognizes that all of those categories that we use to separate ourselves from one another are not as important as the baptism and faith in Christ that Christians share with one another. Baptism and a shared faith break down the barriers between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. In Christ we are all made one. In Christ those barriers are broken down.

Like many of you, I have seen my share of some pretty nasty church fights over issues that come up in the church. Church fights over whether or not a pastor should be fired, church fights over the color of the carpet in the sanctuary, church fights over whether or not gay people should be ordained as elders and pastors, church fights over whether or not the sanctuary should have stained glass windows, church fights over whether or not we should have new pews or refurbished pews.

Some of you remember that church fight. A lot of people here don't have a clue what I am talking about concerning fights over pews.

Christians that make up churches can have some pretty nasty fights with one another. But then there are some occasions when Christians overcome their differences and live out the words which we read from Paul today. I want to share with you something that happened this week that I think gives witness that the words of Paul do have meaning today. His words about how in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female.

On our church prayer list is the name of my friend and colleague Clarisse Schroeder. Clarisse is pastor of the Good Shepherd Episcopal Church in York. Clarisse is a patient at St. Francis Hospital in Greenville receiving treatments related to her cancers. Clarisse is African-American, she is a female priest, and she is Episcopalian.

This week the Presbyterian Church in America held their General Assembly in Greenville. The Presbyterian Church in America is not the denomination that we are a part of here at Allison Creek. The Presbyterian Church in America, or PCA, was formed in the 1970s by people who believe that God does not call women into leadership as pastors and elders, which is different from our denomination that does recognize the gifts of women to lead as elders and pastors.

Also at that time in the 1970s, some churches in the South were told that if they remained in our denomination that churches with white members would have to accept black pastors. The PCA Church and the Episcopal Church in the US hold very different positions about their form of government and about the role of women in leadership.

This week my friend and colleague Wallace Tinsley went to Greenville. Wallace is the Senior Pastor at the PCA Church in Filbert. Before going to the PCA General Assembly, Wallace stopped by St. Francis Hospital to visit with Clarisse. He brought her flowers that he cut from his yard, he prayed with Clarisse, and he read to her Psalm 30. A white, male, PCA pastor and an African-American, female, Episcopal priest from here in York County together sharing one baptism and one faith.

To follow Christ does mean that one is a new creation.

To follow Christ means that we share one faith and one baptism.

All of the ways we choose to separate ourselves are secondary to our one faith and one baptism in Christ Jesus. AMEN.

+++++

-Thanks to Rev. Wallace Tinsley from the Filbert Presbyterian Church for allowing me to share this story.

-Given: June 23, 2013 in Allison Creek Presbyterian Church (York, SC)

Prayer of Confession

Holy God, We come to you fearful that if we tell you what we have done you might not love us any more. We can kill the dreams of those around us with a word, spoken or withheld. We can make the lives of our friends miserable, instead of sharing a miracle. We are filled with that legion of temptations which only leave us empty and wanting more.

Forgive us, Gracious Father. Remind us that we are no longer sinners, but your children. In baptism, we are clothed in the graciousness and faithfulness of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who came that we might be set free of all that imprisons us. Here these our prayers today.

Prayers of the People

Steadfast God, we go through times when we feel alone, when we feel like the world is against us, when we feel there is no one on our side. You are always there, our Advocate and Redeemer, our Rock and Strength. Bring us comfort when we feel despair. Remind us of your presence when we feel alone. Comfort us when we feel wounded by the actions of others. Help us to live into Your hope, knowing that You are at work in all around us, and especially through the love and care of others.

We have to admit to you, O God, that we have not always celebrated our oneness in you. We have allowed differences of opinion to keep us apart. But we learn through Paul's words that faith in you means that there is no longer slave or free, Jew or Gentile, male or female. Teach us to honor and celebrate our common baptisms and common faith.