

This changes everything!

Galatians 3:23-29

June 20, 2010

So there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women ...

Yes, there is! There is a lot of difference between Jews and Gentiles. They are at each other's throats! First it was the Egyptians and then the Canaanites, then the Assyrians and Babylonians, then the Persians and the Greeks and the Romans. Then it was Christians in Russia and Germany. Now it is Muslims in Iran and Iraq, in Syria and in Palestine. Jews and non-Jews have always been enemies and still are.

There is still a lot of difference between slaves and free people. In the last two centuries, the world economy has created enormous wealth, but that wealth remains concentrated among precious few countries and precious few individuals. The story of the exploitation of the poor by the rich, of the many by the few, of the not-powerful by the powerful, of the unfree by the free has been told over and over and over again -- in Haiti and Zimbabwe, in Panama and Chile, in Iran and the Philippines.

Even in our own nation, prosperous times disproportionately benefit those who already have much, while a down economy hurts most those who already have little. The gap between rich and poor among us is growing ever wider.

The richest 1 percent of US citizens own 40 percent of the total property of the country, while 80 percent of US citizens own just 16 percent.

Since the 1990s, 40 percent of increased wealth went into the pockets of the rich minority, while only 1 percent went to the poor majority.

From 1977 to 1999, the after-tax income of the richest 20 percent of American families increased by 43 percent, while that of the poorest 20 percent decreased 9 percent.

And there is still a lot of difference between men and women. You know of the cultures around the world and even within our own country in which women are treated as property, with little freedom or personal choice. You know of the women who are required to hide themselves in public and forbidden to speak among men. But even among "progressive" cultures, women still fall short of men in pay and opportunity and education and power. And isn't it true, more often than not, that in public conversation and media coverage, a woman is characterized by how she looks and a man by what he does?

There is still a lot of difference!

So when Paul said there is no difference was he mistaken or just plain wrong? But, wait. Paul was not speaking to the world at large; he was speaking to the church. Once we are joined to Christ, there is no more difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women.

Yes, there is! The church, which began as a Jewish sect, is now almost exclusively Gentile, and even among us Gentile Christians, the church is sharply divided along racial and ethnic lines. The church that is truly racially diverse is a rare exception indeed. Just look at the churches in our own community.

But, even more than race, it is economic status that sorts Christian churches into homogenous social groupings. The poor are those we serve, not those with whom we worship and pray and eat.

And in large segments of the Christian church, Catholic and Protestant and Orthodox, women are still precluded from positions of leadership, still forbidden to teach men. What Paul's female colleagues were already doing to nurture the growth of the church at its beginning would now be proscribed in much of that very church to which they helped give birth. Even the United Church of Christ, our "wonderfully enlightened" United Church of Christ, has never had a female president.

So what can we say? The fruit of the gospel, the sign of the gospel, the evidence of the power of the gospel is this: that there is no longer any difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women. If these differences persist, what can we say? Have we failed Christ? Or is the gospel itself empty of meaning and power? Has Christ failed us?

Listen again, carefully, to what Paul wrote to the Galatian churches.

It is through faith that all of you are God's children in union with Christ Jesus. You were baptized into union with Christ, and now you are clothed, so to speak, with the life of Christ himself. So there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus.

"You are all one in union with Christ Jesus." That's a declarative sentence, a statement of fact, not an exhortation or an expression of how things should be. So often we read the scriptures as if it is a book of moral principles or guidelines for right living. The Bible does include such things, but only after the fact, after the fact of what God has done and what God is doing!

The Bible is first and foremost a book about what God does, not about what we're supposed to do. The Bible is a testament, a testimony, to the wonderful acts of God, and the "New" Testament is a testimony, a witness, to the wonderful acts of God in us through Christ Jesus.

"You are all one in union with Christ Jesus." Not "Try to be one." You are one!

How are you one? Not by what you have done, but by faith in what God has done in Christ. You are made one by your baptism, by your baptism into union with Christ. Baptism is the sign, the emblem, the seal of the life of Christ laid on over and into your life.

That's why there is no difference! In baptism, it's not just you any more. It is Christ in you, Christ joined to you and you to Christ, and in union with Christ, all of you joined to each other. This changes everything. So there is no difference. It may seem like it, but there's not.

You may think or feel that you are different from the Palestinian Catholic worshipping at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, but you are not.

You may think or feel that you are different from the recovering alcoholic worshipping at the Salvation Army church in Saratoga, but you are not.

You may think or feel that you are different from the amen-shouting, hand-waving, feet-dancing, African-American, pentecostal, spirit-filled woman worshipping at the downtown Church of God in Christ, but you are not.

You are all one in union with Christ Jesus, and if you do see a difference, if you do believe there is a difference, if you do act as if there is a difference, you are wrong, terribly wrong. There is no difference, and we must embrace that truth and live it, instead of pretending there still is a difference.

All this makes baptism a rather radical act, doesn't it? When we are baptized into union with Christ, what we were is gone. What we are is a new creation, a new creature. What we were is dead and buried. What we are is alive in Christ and because of Christ. Our lives are no longer our own, but we are slaves of Christ, which means that for the very first time we are truly free, and for the very first time, we are truly ourselves.

Baptism takes us out of our lives, out of this world as it is, and sets us apart for the sake of the world as it should be, for the sake of the world as it will be. Maybe you'll want to think again about that nice baptism you had planned for your little baby?

Or maybe, you'll be all the more eager to do what Jesus told us to do: to go everywhere baptizing people and inviting them to follow Jesus with you!

So, what do we do with this?

First of all, this is what we must not do. Any time we highlight or exploit the differences among us -- among us within this congregation, among the Christian churches throughout this community and nation, among the churches of the many nations -- any time we highlight or exploit the differences among us, we defame Christ and work against God's purposes.

In the same way, any time we highlight or exploit the differences among any peoples, inside or outside the church, we work against God's purposes, because God's plan is to bring all creation together in Christ.

What we must do is proclaim the gospel and live it. We must boldly declare the truth, to each other and to the world, that, because of Christ and in union with Christ, we are one. And we must show that truth by how we live, fulfilling our part in Christ's ministry of reconciliation, his ministry of bringing people and all creation together, the ministry bestowed on us by our baptism.

Quite simply, what we must do is be what we are!