

## **“Unity in Christ”**

May 29, 2016

*Who Cares about Unity?* Series – Memorial Day Sunday

Writing letters is a lost art. My late grandma was a letter-writing pro. She continued to write cards with extended notes later in her life, and there were usually bits of faith and wisdom sprinkled in. My dad writes letters, too, and again, those nuggets of love and good advice mean something when I look back. I cherish letters that Ivan wrote to me earlier in our relationship.

Paul’s letters to early communities of Christians are filled with faith and wisdom, too. Galatians is a very emotional letter. Sometimes Paul is downright angry because some Jewish Christians are telling Gentile Christians that they have to follow Jewish Law and customs to have a true relationship with God.

And the difficult part is that some folks are questioning God’s message. They have forgotten the heart of the Gospel – that Jesus died for them as a sign of God’s grace. Paul reminds them that good behavior won’t get them anywhere. Following the rules of Jewish Law won’t save them – it’s Jesus’ faithfulness in going to the cross and our trust in his love that brings salvation.

It’s a great message, so why is it so hard to grasp? Imagine how you might react if you were a Jewish Christian. For years, you’ve followed the Law. God had given the Law to Moses as a way to please God. The psalms say that the Law shows the path of life. The Law has been important in your life and faith. Now you’ve accepted that Jesus is the Messiah sent from God. But what do you do with the Law? Doesn’t it matter anymore?

At the beginning of chapter 3, Paul goes all the way back to Abraham. Abraham didn’t have the Law to follow. He simply trusted in God’s promise that God would give make him the father of many nations. God said that Abraham would have land and children, and Abraham believed God. He is the ultimate example of faith.

God’s promise existed long before God gave the Law to Moses – about 430 years before! So Abraham’s relationship with God wasn’t based on him keeping the Law, but rather in trusting God with his whole heart. God’s blessing to Abraham wasn’t earned. It was freely given to him.

The Law still served a purpose, though. It helped to reveal God’s will and show people their need for God. But the Law couldn’t take away sin. It’s faith that Jesus died on the cross and then conquered death for our sake that forgives our sin. Faith makes the difference.

Someone said, "Faith is not a matter of believing the odd or the miraculous; it is simply a matter of receiving gratefully a gift that God has chosen to give us, completely without regard to our deserving. It is a matter of reliance on the Word of God as the one truth upon which we stake our lives." That's what Abraham did – he staked his life on God's promise.

We become heirs to the promise God made to Abraham not because of anything we do, but because God sent Jesus to show us the ultimate gift of grace. Paul told the Galatians to cling to God's grace and understand that grace gave them new life. The Law couldn't do that.

Paul explains that before Jesus came to show us who God truly is, the Law was like a special servant. He uses the Greek word *pedagogue*, kind like a chaperone in Greek and Roman families whose job it was to supervise children until about 16 years old. They walked them to school, watched their behavior, and kept them out of trouble.

Just like this special chaperone was no longer needed, neither was the Law. It was fine for Jewish Christians to follow their customs, but it wasn't necessary for Gentile Christians to take on Jewish customs. All of them, Jews and Gentiles alike, had a new relationship with God through Jesus Christ. They were children of God who had literally "put on Christ" in their baptism. All of them were accepted into God's family. Everyone could have a direct relationship with God through Jesus. It wasn't about being the right culture anymore. It was about believing in Jesus.

David Bartlett says, "Whatever the parade of believers looks like, we can guess it is the opposite of academic processions where we are clothed in our college colors, and also of ecclesiastical processions where the fancier the clothing, the higher the clerical rank." He talks about how each of us comes just as we are for baptism "everybody equally dripping wet and every hair out of place...The dignity of Christ is the only dignity that remains."

So far in Galatians, Paul has focused on personal faith. Now Paul makes a shift to how we relate to one another. Christian character is also about how we live together. It means that we are one in Christ Jesus. So being a Christian calls us to be a community.

But it's not just any community. It's a community that's grounded in Jesus Christ and sees itself in union with Jesus Christ. It's an alternative community – different from what's going around in the world because it shows others the Kingdom of God. It's a community led by the Holy Spirit where everyone is equal before God. No one is better than anyone else. No one is of higher status than anyone else. No matter what our struggles, our family dysfunctions (and we all have them!), or our hurts.

What a wonderful thought - and what a challenge for us! Can we actually say that there are no second-class members of God's family? Paul lifts up ethnicity, socio-

economic status, and gender. Are we willing to add other categories that we create as barriers to unity - sexual orientation, political leanings, or anything else that keeps us apart? Can we actually claim that all are welcome here – not because we say it, but because God says it? Friends, this is big. If we take it to heart, it will change lives and transform the world!

Consider a story from Rwanda in Africa. You may know about the civil war between the Hutus and Tutsis. The story is told of a group of Christians worshipping together who were confronted by authorities. They were asked to separate themselves: who are Hutus and who are Tutsis? They refused to separate themselves because, they said, we are one in Christ Jesus. For this act of faith, they were killed.

This was a striking image of what Paul is truly calling us to be, and I'm not sure I could be so courageous. We struggle to define ourselves, and even in the church, we focus too much on the differences we have rather than our common faith in Jesus Christ.

When I was in seminary, I had lived across the hall from two African-American women, Coco and Camille. One day, Camille and I had an interesting discussion about faith. She was raised in the Pentecostal tradition. I had my opinions about Pentecostals. I wasn't sure about speaking in tongues and being slain in the Spirit. Camille explained it to me, and I am forever grateful for her helping me understand and be more open to that tradition. After all, we are one in Christ Jesus.

John Wesley challenged those who asked him what it meant to be a Methodist. He said, "The distinguishing marks of a Methodist are not his opinions of any sort." He wasn't the one who took the label of "Methodist," but he and others who met together were called Methodists because of their methodical approach to the Christian life. They met to study and pray, and they wanted to live holy lives. But Wesley was more concerned about being Christian and united with others in Christ rather than being Methodist.

Paul's appeal to the Galatians is just as powerful to our life together as it was so many years ago. Remember that Paul had been the most loyal legalist around. He had upheld the Law like no one else, but now he says that our belief in Jesus Christ doesn't allow us to categorize people anymore. Rather, we are one in Christ. And someone has said it well: "When we accept Christ, we also accept all whom he has redeemed as one with us because we are one in him." God's will is for us to be united in Christ so that the church is strengthened and God is glorified.

One powerful example of how we are united in Christ is prayer. When you offer a name for prayer in worship, when you ask others to pray, when we gathered on Wednesday night, I was aware that all of us who gathered were not the same. We are

different ages, men and women, of different family lines, but one in Christ. We were people who attend different worship services, but we are one in Christ. That unity in diversity is a really beautiful thing! We trust in the community – that all are welcome, that we will pray, and that everyone is accepted.

Friends, we are one in Christ Jesus and called to live as people who seek the Kingdom of God every day. That means looking past the labels that we have for one another: old, young, rich, poor, person of color, white, Democrat, Republican, liberal, conservative, progressive, traditional, educated or not, disabled, ill, different, addict, and the list goes on.

That means looking at one another as God sees each of us – as a beloved and cherished child of God. That means standing up for what Jesus calls us to do – to love when it means going against the crowd, to care when no one else does, to give when it's not deserved. Friends, we have put on Christ, so we must act like Christ.

When I think about how God gathers us together in the church, it really is amazing. There's no other way, except by the power of the Holy Spirit, that you and I would be worshipping together. Our baptism in the name of Jesus Christ that draws us in, and the Holy Spirit keeps us together.

Unity in Christ. It's already who we are, but we must claim it and live it by God's grace. We need each other to stay faithful to God's promises.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.