

February 5, 2017
Lesson 10: Gal. 3:26-4:7
Re-Created to Live in Harmony

Context:

Our lesson today jumps to the New Testament. The book of Galatians has been one of the most influential letters on theologians and church fathers debating issues of freedom and faith, gospel and law, the Spirit and ethics. All church fathers from the early patristics to Martin Luther and John Calvin used Galatians to help people understand the freedom that comes in Christ. The author of the epistle is Paul and scholars assert that the letter was possibly passed around multiple times. Most scholars assert the letter was written anywhere between A.D. 49 and A.D. 56.¹

The recipients are a little more mysterious. The Galatians were Celts who had immigrated to central Asia Minor around 285 B.C. and lived in cities such as Ancyra, Pessinus, and Tavium.² In the Roman conquest, many of these cities were overtaken and the citizens became a part of the Roman Empire. There were Gentiles, Jews, and Jewish Christians living in the area in those early centuries. As such, Galatia was a diverse place with many different people including immigrants and native citizens to the area.

In the rise of the church, we do know this was an important part of Paul's ministry. There are hypotheses that Paul visited this area many times on his missionary journey. Throughout the letter, Paul references the love and support he felt there whenever he was traveling from place to place.

One of the main issues that the churches of Galatia struggled with included what they were to practice and believe. As we see throughout the letters, there were itinerant ministers traveling and preaching different messages. Galatia saw several of these ministers who preached messages that left the people confused about who they were in Christ. One of the issues that was the message preached that predominant Gentile congregations adopt the Jewish practice of circumcision to belong to the people of God.³ Thus, you had to be circumcised in order to be a part of the church. As such, there were questions around Jesus and what one had to do in order to be a part of the early church. Who was in and who was out? That was the question that led to a great struggle and debate among the early believers.

Application:

When I was a intern at St. John's United Methodist Church in Memphis, Tennessee for a summer internship, we visited the First Congregational Church (a United Church of Christ congregation) as part of a program dealing with conflict and how to have hard conversations. The worship space was one of the largest I had ever seen and had a lot of space. At the back of the sanctuary was a labyrinth and at the center of the labyrinth was a baptismal font. The font was stained glass and within it were the words from Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor

¹ Charles B. Cousar, "Galatians: Interpretation," (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1982), 6.

² Ibid., 3

³ Ibid., 4.

is there male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” It was a beautiful reminder that because we belong to Christ, the distinctions of the world fade away. No longer can one say that their identity prevents them from being a child of Jesus. They belong to him and they become a part of that family when the water is poured over their head. As we were told the church history, we heard a lot about conflict and how whenever things got tough, they would go to the baptismal font and remember who they were in Christ.

In today’s world, we like distinctions and divisions sometimes. We see it in the South with football teams. In Alabama, you root for Auburn or Alabama. For Floridians, you root for FSU or the University of Florida. In our church world, especially small towns, you’re a Methodist or a Baptist. In our political system you are a Republican or Democrat. All in all, those are not necessarily bad things. I am an Auburn fan because I grew up closer to Auburn and many family members went to Auburn. I was baptized in a United Methodist church and generations of my family are United Methodists including having a father who served churches in AWF. Politically, I make decisions based on the candidate or issues being presented. One size doesn’t always fit all. All of them are things that are important to me and different things fuel my passion for why I believe in them.

None of these things in belonging to one or another makes me a better person than anyone else. But if one is not careful, your allegiance can overtake you in different way. After that football game, you may not want to see or speak to that friend who roots for the other team. A mourning period is acceptable, but your connection with that person is more important. When it comes to church, how many times do we see people spilt or follow a certain preacher or group because there was a major disagreement. What if people were to talk to one another and hear about their own faith story including their doubts and fears. We’ve seen the fallout that comes from politics. Families and friends sometimes cannot even stand to be in the same room as one another. What if we were to understand that maybe the best thing to do is listen to why that person has that point of view and try to see different perspectives as conversation pieces instead of a time to scorn or deride.

If we are honest with one another, we will recognize that we are one in Jesus Christ. Those divisions should not and must not separate us. We may not always have the same view or experience, but what makes our Lord so wonderful is that he loves us anyways. And he claims all of us anyways. All of us are equal in his sight and all of us are called to see Christ in one another. When it comes to conflict or disagreement we are called to understand that the person you most vehemently disagree with is a child of God. And at the end of the day, they are a brother and sister in Christ just like you. Jesus came so that we may have peace and Jesus came so that we can learn how to live with one another in a sometimes very divisive world.