

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 40: 3-5
SECOND LESSON: Galatians 3:23-29
June 19, 2022

“The Power to Divide Us”
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We don't really understand how novel and strange Paul's ideas were because we're used to them. We are not aware of how totally offensive it would have been to Jews at the time (and to Jews now) to be told that the law was set up as a temporary guardian to guide us and keep us safe, but that now Gentiles are also children of Abraham, not because they converted to Judaism, but because they professed faith in a condemned criminal and proclaimed him to be the Messiah, a Messiah who furthermore it is alleged rose from the dead. It is not at all surprising to me that Paul was chased out of every Jewish town and synagogue he went to. I'm only surprised he made it as far as he did.

There is nothing subtle about Paul in Galatians, probably because the entire letter was dictated in a rant. I have said this before, but the best way to read Galatians is to yell it. Paul was absolutely beside himself because the church he had founded there was quickly turning its back on everything he taught them. Jewish Christian believers had arrived and told them they all needed to become Jews first. And if their theology had won the day, that is what would have happened, but it is very likely that Christianity would not have spread throughout the world like it did. To convert to Judaism was a long and arduous process, and some Jews didn't even think it possible, rejecting such converts as not really Jewish. And for those who grew up outside of Judaism, the Law with all its meticulous requirements regarding clean and unclean things, was often just too much.

Paul sets the unifying power of Christ against profound social and religious divisions, beginning with what for him was the most basic—the division between Jew and Gentile. The estrangement of these two groups was understood to be irreconcilable. But for Paul the power to divide had been broken. In Christ, he says, there is neither Jew nor Gentile.

The Church abandoned its requirements for Gentile converts early on. Gentiles were coming to faith—and the Holy Spirit was manifest in them. *Who were they to argue with God?* Initially Gentiles were just asked to keep a few rules in order to not cause offense. Eventually the Law was understood to be replaced. And yet morally the law was never really replaced. Dietary laws were abandoned. The Ten Commandments were not. But our understanding of how to be right with God changed. For Paul it was no longer a matter of perfectly keeping every detail of the Law. Temple sacrifices were no longer relevant or needed. Instead, it was all about faith and grace. Paul writes, “So in Christ

Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

The rite of entry into Judaism is circumcision. There is no marker of belonging for women. But for those who belong to Christ it is baptism, a profound equalizer. Paul borrowed imagery from the early baptisms when he says that we are clothed with Christ, because the person being baptized was often clothed in a white garment. We have taken on a new identity. We are now clothed in Christ’s nature.

In Christ, Paul says, not only is there neither Jew nor Gentile, there is also neither slave nor free. Today is Juneteenth, a day marking the end of slavery in the United States, although not the end of oppression. Slavery in the ancient world was an institution upon which economies and nations depended, although it was not racially based. People of all racial ethnic backgrounds could be enslaved. And there were so many slaves that a majority of the population in any city in the Roman Empire were slaves. They greatly outnumbered free people. Control was held through brute force and terror. If an owner was killed by his slave, every slave owned by that man was then put to death, even slaves living on distant estates. Every man, woman and child were herded together into an amphitheater and killed. As a result, slaves were highly motivated to protect even the most abusive master.

It never occurred to anyone in the 1st century that slavery was wrong. In the Greek culture of Aristotle and Plato, hundreds of years before Christ, Aristotle believed that some people were “natural slaves.” Their souls were not complete and they lacked the ability to reason. Slaves were “living tools.” Although Plato did not touch on the subject directly, he too believed in the inherent inferiority of slaves. The concept of a slave being less than fully human is not unique to the American experience. It is an ancient rationalization for a fundamentally unjust act.

Because Romans often freed at least some of their slaves at the age of 30, a class of freedman and freedwomen existed. But the taint of inferiority still hung over a formerly enslaved person, and they were barred from holding public office. For Paul to say that there was NO difference between slave and free was going too far. That was insane. Being a slave changed a person. It permanently demeaned and damaged them in the eyes of society. But not in the eyes of God. The shocking truth is that in Christ there is no slave or free. All are human. All stand equal before God.

The Jewish Gentile division was rigidly enforced, at least on the side of the Jews. The difference between slave and free existed everywhere in the Empire. And the distinction between male and female permeated every area of life. Regardless of religion, the life of a woman was far more circumscribed than the life of a man. Women could not testify in court. Property ownership was murky and depended upon marital status. Women were deemed intellectually, morally and physically inferior to men. The fact that women had no rights and deserved no rights was universally assumed. Women were like human shaped cattle, good for breeding and working. They were in no way equal to men. They were almost a different species! So when Paul concludes, in Christ there is neither male nor female, he may be making the most shocking statement of all.

In the world of the first century religion divided people. National identity divided people. Economic status divided people. And gender divided people. All of these divisions are still present today. In place of the category of slave and free we now have poor and rich, black and white, inner-city ghettos and smalltown middle America, men and women, young and old. But the umbrella of division that is sucking us all into its vortex right now is political. We need to be careful about making a distinction here, however, because even though we say it's political, it's not really about ideology at all. The same action of a President that is praised by people belonging to that president's political party would be criticized if he or she were from the opposite party. It's not so much the action or policy that matters. It's who is doing it. Very little of what is ripping America apart today has to do with policy. A tragically small percentage of people vote on the basis of policy. For most it is about identity. We don't choose parties, we take sides.

Sometimes we call this the "culture wars." Sometimes this form of divisiveness is called tribalism, but regardless of what it's called, it is even impacting where people choose to live. We are in the process of separating out, of choosing to live only among people who think like us and look like us. In 1976, 26.8% of Americans lived in counties in which the winner in a presidential election won by more than 20%. By 2016 that percentage was up to 60%. Heaven only knows what it is now. We are sorting ourselves out, separating by geography. And we separate from one another even more in the television stations we watch and social media we follow. And we all do this! Not because we are evil, but because *it's just more comfortable to be around people who are like us*. There's less cognitive dissonance. We don't have to question our assumptions. We don't have to work hard to work alongside someone who thinks differently.

But Christ has the power to break down all of these walls. Our primary identity should not be political. It should not be racial. It should not be geographical. **It should be spiritual.** In Christ there is neither Republican nor Democrat, black nor white, male nor female. In Christ no matter how different someone is from us in external ways, at the heart we connect, because at the heart we are all sinners saved by grace.

The power to divide us in this world is great. And we often find ourselves swept along with the tide. But it is time that we resist that and reclaim our spiritual center and spiritual connections. We must learn to love one another, because we belong with one another. Amen.

Isaiah 40: 3-5

³ A voice of one calling:

"In the wilderness prepare
the way for the Lord;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,

the rugged places a plain.
⁵ And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Galatians 3:23-29

²³ Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. ²⁴ So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

²⁶ So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.