

Room For Everyone

Galatians 3:23-29

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

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There's room at the table for everyone. This is more than just a catchy phrase we wear on t-shirts and put on a banner at the church. This is what we celebrate today. It is at the heart of who we are and how we understand God calls us to be.

And this isn't just because we are a congregation in a progressive town where being diverse and accepting is the norm. This isn't just because we've learned from both life sciences and cognitive sciences that things like gender identity and sexual orientation are part of who we are and can be natural even when they differ from the norms of our culture. This isn't just because we have become more aware of the impacts of sexism and racism, not just between individuals, but the ways these -isms are built into our systems and culture, and how they have caused brokenness in our world, a brokenness that we must address.

While those are all good reasons to choose diversity and acceptance, there is another reason that is so important to us and central to who we are. It is our faith. "There's room at the table for everyone" is something we embrace *because* this is what we understand our faith calls us to.

And we see that in many places in scripture. Here in Galatians is one of those. After all, Paul is writing to the churches in Galatia in response to the conflict they were having around the question of whether Gentiles had to become Jews before becoming Christians. These churches, which Paul had founded, were being infiltrated by other teachers who were trying to convince them that in addition to embracing the ways of Jesus, Gentile Christians must also follow the Jewish law. And that conflict, along with other hierarchical understandings that Paul hoped to help the people unlearn, is responded to most directly in that one little verse toward the end of today's reading, Galatians 3:28 which says, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (NRSV).

While Paul has often gotten a bad rap when it comes to the topic of women vs. men and the question of sexual orientation, the reality is that the teachings of Paul, especially those which scholars feel confident came from Paul, are far more egalitarian than many like to claim.

Meanwhile, he also wrote within his context which was a context where women *were* expected to submit to their husbands, or other primary men in their lives; where the expectation was that people would enter into relationships with people of the opposite gender largely for procreation and financial security; where slaves *were* expected to be

obedient to their masters; where Gentiles and Jews had little to do with each other and *certainly* didn't share a table.

So, it is to this context that Paul is speaking, reminding the congregations in Galatia that the church was called, not to affirm the ways of the world, but to look different from it.

As Clark Williamson and Ron Allen write in their book *Preaching the Letters Without Dismissing the Law*, "Because the church lives on this side of the apocalypse and its members do not yet live in resurrection bodies, elements of their present identities continue: men go on being men, and women, women. Presumably slaves continue as slaves and free people, as free, and, of course, Jewish people continue in that identity, and Gentiles, as Gentiles. However, insofar as their life in the church goes, they relate with one another as an egalitarian community of the new age" (220).

What we too often forget is that the early church was a much more egalitarian and accepting place than the world around it, and than the church has been across so much of its history. Unfortunately when the church and empire became bedfellows, this largely went by the wayside as patriarchy and other top down hierarchies became the way of the church. This not only influenced the position of women, who if we read scripture honestly were many of the early church leaders, but also influenced the attitude toward LGBTQ people as sexism is at the heart of that conversation, too.

So, you may ask, what do we do then with the scripture passages that speak in favor of the submission of women or against same gendered sexual activity? Well, first we remember the context. That in and of itself reminds us that we can't just read the words on the page and apply them directly to our lives today because context changes meaning.

Saying "wives submit to your husbands" in a patriarchal culture where women were considered property and few had the choice not to submit, is very different than saying that today in a time when our understandings have changed and when we affirm that women's abilities and leadership are as powerful, and sometimes moreso, than that of their male counterparts.

Saying, it was unnatural when "men committed shameless acts with men" (Romans 1:27, NRSV) in a context like the church at Rome where the Greek word refers to being atypical according to the norms of the culture, not to being unethical or immoral is very different than making a claim about sexual orientation being sinful. Calling out male prostitutes and sodomites (I Corinthians 6:9, NRSV) in a context like that of Corinth where temple prostitution was common and power was often used to exploit another, is very different than the question of whether or not God affirms healthy, committed same gendered relationships.

Friends, even in the Stone-Campbell tradition out of which the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) grew, the understanding of inclusion at the table has always been a growing thing. But it has also been a core value from the beginning when our founders

left the Presbyterian Church because only those who belonged to *their* church, affirmed *their* creeds, and were approved by *their* elders were allowed to share communion. And over the years, as we have prayed and listened to the text beyond our expectations, we have come to realize again and again that the table is a place of extravagant welcome, for children and adults, for seekers and believers, for people of all races and cultures, of all orientations and gender identities, all perspectives and even politics. We have come to embrace that the welcome at the table even applies to those who don't want to eat at a diverse and affirming table like ours.

And if, for you, it was actually the church that taught you the importance of exclusion, consider this which I came across just this week: THE BIBLE IS CLEAR: Moabites are bad. They were not to be allowed to dwell among God's people (Deut.23). BUT THEN comes the story of "Ruth the Moabite," which challenges the prejudice against Moabites. THE BIBLE IS CLEAR: People from Uz are evil (Jer. 25). BUT THEN comes the story of Job, a man from Uz who was the "most blameless man on earth." THE BIBLE IS CLEAR: No foreigners or eunuchs allowed (Deut. 23). BUT THEN comes the story of an African eunuch welcomed into the church (Acts 8). THE BIBLE IS CLEAR: God's people hated Samaritans. BUT THEN Jesus tells a story that shows not all Samaritans were bad. THE STORY MAY BEGIN with prejudice, discrimination, & animosity, but the Spirit moves God's people towards openness, welcome, inclusion, acceptance, & affirmation" (seen on Facebook).

Friends, that is what we celebrate today. And it is grounded in our faith, in paying attention to the heart of God, in paying attention to the life of Jesus - the one we claim to follow.

Remember, the Bible has long been used to hold people captive, literally and figuratively. It has been used to defend slavery. It has been used to hold women in a place of submission under men. It has been used to defend nearly every bad behavior of our nation. It has been used against our LGBTQ friends. But such uses require us to take things out of context, to not acknowledge the differences between our culture and that of the Bible, to focus on the words on the page rather than the meaning behind them. And such uses require us to ignore the life of Jesus.

Because, who was Jesus? He was one who ate with those others rejected. He was one who never used God as an excuse to push people away. He was one who loved those others named unlovable. He was the reason the early church was inclusive and affirming and is the reason, even across the church's sometimes unfaithful history, we continue to embrace that today.

In her book, *The Strength of the Weak*, Dorothee Sölle recounts the story of a rabbi who asked his students how one could recognize the time when night ends and day begins. "Is it when, from a great distance, you can tell a dog from a sheep?" one student asked. "No," said the rabbi. "Is it when, from a great distance, you can tell a date palm from a fig tree?" "No," said the rabbi. "Then when is it?" the students asked. "It is when you look into the face of any human creature and see your brother or your sister there. Until

then, night is still with us” (Dorothee Sölle, *The Strength of the Weak: Toward a Christian Feminist Identity*, trans. Robert and Rita Kimber, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984, 41).

The world has a long way to go, but Paul’s words to the congregations at Galatia remind us that the church is called to lead the way, to set a different standard, to embrace the egalitarian community of God’s intention, and in each and every human to see a sibling and to welcome them to the table. May it be so.