

Sermon: Year C, Proper 7  
Texts: Zechariah 12:8-10, 13:1  
Galatians 3:23-29  
Luke 9:18-24

In light of the reading we have heard this morning from Paul's letter to the Galatians, I feel compelled to ask just one simple question: did he actually mean what he said?

It's easy enough, whenever one is faced with Paul's convoluted prose, to allow his words to float by as if they were one more instance of impassioned hyperbole – the inflated rhetoric of an excited apostle. Paul, after all, has never been known for the logical precision of his arguments or the crystalline clarity of his presentation. It's even more likely for us not to hear him when our liturgy itself domesticates his wildness. Our own habits of reverence tend to make us staid rather than attentive. Whatever he said, it must, of course, we presume, conform to the proper standards of our modern Episcopal docility: our texts are useful for gentle advice or quiet admonishment, but they shouldn't be too hot or too cold. We read them, preferably, as a message that feels just right – comfortable and pleasantly uplifting.

But today this norm seems to have been violated by a claim that, if we listen to it, is either outrageously false or, at the other end of the spectrum of meaning, the Word of God that leaves absolutely nothing untouched. There is no pleasant middle ground in what Paul wrote. How are we to understand this declaration: "There is no longer Jew nor Greek," he proclaimed. "There is no longer slave or free. There is no longer male nor is there female, for all of us have been made one in Christ Jesus." What did he mean by this? Was this just an excessive flight of imagination, a dazzling turn of phrase designed to merely impress? Or did Paul intend for us to take these eliminations with great seriousness, pondering how, possibly, this could be understood as the literal truth?

I strongly suspect that Paul believed the latter, and I believe, just as strongly, that the tragedy of Christianity today is our own inclination to let Paul's words drift away untended, like so much wistfulness – because the world we experience is stubbornly riven by more divisions than we can comprehend, divisions both near and far, many of which are banal and some of which are forbiddingly deep. In comparison with such obvious difference and disagreement, unity is sometimes evoked as an inspiration. Sometimes it is achieved as a momentary illusion. Yet, inevitably, on almost any given issue, we prove ourselves stunningly adept at dividing ourselves again and again into opposing camps, which legitimates our struggles, our defiance, and ultimately the violence we pursue against one another.

What would it mean, then, if, for once, we were to take Paul exactly at his word? What if we were to listen to this one verse as if it were truly Scripture, as God's news to us, surprising and beautifully unsettling? We don't need to practice a litany of all the ways we divide ourselves. Especially in the last six years we have become masterful in identifying all our foes, which are legion. What has been lost in repeated waves of suspicion and fear, however, is a vision of a world literally transformed by God. This is what Paul urges us to see, not just figuratively, as a hopeful dream or a nice idea, but as the unshakeable truth that has been established in Jesus – the same truth which is the very substance of our faith. This transformation of everything, announced specifically by Paul, deserves our attentiveness.

In Christ, Paul said, "there is no longer Jew or Greek." He could not have meant that these cultural or ethnic differences were now eliminated. They, of course, remain still today, traceable by lineage, marked by innumerable distinctions of history, ritual, and heritage. What Paul saw erased in Jesus, however, and more significantly, was the deep division

between a chosen people and then all those somehow left outside the favor of God. This was the longstanding division of his time and the testimony of the Hebrew Scriptures. Yet, now, the promise delivered to Abraham had been extended to all humankind, without exception and dependent on no conditions. In Christ God's grace, he declared, has no limits nor any religious boundaries. What God has done in the redemption of any has been made, even more, the redemption of all. It is not we, therefore, who are required to save ourselves by making the right choice between competing gods; it is God who has already chosen to reconcile the world to himself, wholly, freely, and independent of even the most basic separation of religious traditions. There is no longer Jew nor Greek.

In Christ, Paul said, "there is no longer slave or free." He could not have meant by this that we would no longer suffer bondage or abuse the privileges we have. Inequality continues to be the constant struggle of the world. We are daily distinguished as rich and poor, learned and ignorant, esteemed and despised, those who are invited in and those who are left out, those who have pedigree and those who are granted no standing whatsoever. Freedom is highly variable. Yet, in truth, more significantly, before God, none of this privilege endures and no unequal favor is given. No one is cited as more deserving of reward than another. All the ways by which we measure ourselves above or below others have been superceded, because when God looks on us he sees Christ first and Christ at the last. Our ultimate standing comes in Jesus' name, and since this is how we are perceived by God, we are urged by Paul to perceive others with the same unwavering grace – no matter who is before us. There is no longer slave nor free.

Paul then finished with the most radical disclosure of all. In Christ, he said, "there is no longer male or female." The most fundamental distinction we know as persons is here undone. What is most intimate to us, constitutive of our very identity, is suddenly negated. How can we understand this? Gender is the great chasm splitting creation. It is the source of enormous richness; yet, too, it engenders constant turmoil. Here we feel most vulnerable. About these matters we become most indignant. Determining who each other should be as men and women, we become deeply embattled. No issue is more explosive, and as we Episcopalians know too well, no other disagreements are as vitriolic or dangerous. Yet Paul has the audacity and courage to call our most personal righteousness and indignation profoundly into question. Not even this division, no matter how wide or how deep it is, he said, warrants the dissolution of the communion we have in Jesus Christ. Divine love runs more deeply. Our own love, in Christ, should be equally embracing. Even here. There is no longer male nor female.

In essence, the thrust of Paul's message to the Galatians was just this: who do you see when you see one another? Do you see a Muslim, a Buddhist, and Hindu, a Mormon, a Seventh Day Adventist and thus an opponent? Who do you see: an executive, an illegal immigrant, a bum, a country club member, someone whose class makes them noxious to you? Who do you see: someone who is moral or perverse, adulterous or faithful, promiscuous or devoted, destructive or assuring? On all these counts, Paul was emphatic. These are all secondary issues, important but not determinative. For what is primary and can never be forgotten or dismissed, Paul insisted, is precisely this: when we look at anyone, who we must see, always, regardless of all else, is someone who cannot be rejected or turned away – because this was already done, conclusively and brutally against Jesus, who, then, in turn, was resurrected by the free grace of God and given favor above all others. And therefore, our every approach to every person must be informed by the same redemption and reconciliation. Jesus is the one universal, in whose name God has gathered all the world together. Our differences do not cease, but they have been completely supplanted by a union cannot be legitimately broken.

I find it sad that today, as in many times past, so many choose to consider themselves Biblical fundamentalists as a way to insist that their schism from and condemnation of

others is somehow demanded by God. It's strange good news that breaks us and breaks us apart. But today, at some risk of being misunderstood, I will declare myself a Biblical fundamentalist too, though in another manner. Here, in regard to this declaration of Paul, I must stand with all the strength of literalness. He meant exactly what he said. In Christ we are bound together, not divided. In Christ we are brought into a communion that persists beyond all difference and disruption. In Christ God has determined the salvation of all the world. And what has been given to us in his name is the liberty to bring this transforming news of mercy, peace, and joy to everyone who has been cast out and everyone who has been cast down. For nothing, Paul said, nothing in all the world, is able to separate us from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ our Lord. This is the one mystery into which we are called to live. This is fundamental and in regard to this I cannot waver.

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