

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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12th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Galatians 3:23-29

From Polarity to Unity

Are you, like me, tired of being categorized?

In this never-ending presidential election season, I have heard numerous commentators talk about the electorate (that's us) in terms of our "demographics." "Demographics are everything," they have said both before and after each state primary. Race, ethnicity, gender, age, educational level, social class, religious affiliation—the commentators are confident that if they know these defining facts about us, they can accurately predict our votes. And after the votes are tallied, they are consistently reported by categories. White male evangelical or black female millennial generation or Hispanic middle class—we all fit into one of these permutations and combinations which explain why we vote the way we do—at least according to the commentators. And if the commentators are analyzing us this way, you can bet the candidates are, too. Campaign staff spend long hours deciding where to focus their candidate's time and energy, and the best way for their candidate to appeal to the desired particular demographic.

Of course it's not just politicians who categorize the population. Marketers specialize in knowing the wants and needs of various sorts of people. Are you a baby boomer? Expect to get mail and email and see ads on Facebook for cures for the problems of aging. Are you a millennial? You are today's most desirable market, so advertising for entertainment, clothing, electronics, and most consumer products are aimed at you. Are you a child or youth? They've studied what appeals to you, and are spending big bucks to make you a lifelong consumer of whatever it is they're trying to sell. From a marketer's perspective, we are our demographic, and always a prospective consumer.

Everywhere we go, it seems we are given a label. And sometimes we proudly claim an identity label for ourselves. The black pride movement of the 60s spawned imitators, so we have feminists and womanists, Hispanics, Latinos, and Latinas, Native Americans and American Indians, members of First Nations or specific tribal affiliations, Asians, South Asians, Pacific Islanders, biracial persons, multiracial persons, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, inquiring—the list goes on as we claim the right to name ourselves and our stories. When discrimination and stereotyping have been harmful to people, the right to name ourselves is very important.

But if you are tired of being categorized by others, you've come to the right place. For as today's scripture reminds us, in Christ, the categories collapse. The distinctions we think matter so much become irrelevant. For in Christ, we are all one.

Paul's letter makes clear that this is the work of Christ. "Until Christ came," "in Christ Jesus," "baptized into Christ" we are "clothed with Christ" are the phrases which precede the startling claim that there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female. What can he mean by this? These distinctions, these markers of our tribe, our place in society, and even our gender aren't erased, are they? Reading the other correspondence of Paul in the New Testament, he still holds a Jewish consciousness and identity. He addresses slaves and slaveowners. And he speaks of men and women as distinct groups. The coming of Christ did not turn us all into one color and culture, one economic and social class, and gender neutral persons. Yet the coming of Christ was, for Paul, an eschatological event, an end-times event which transformed the way he saw people in his time. The coming of Christ

challenges us today in the same way. The coming of Christ is past, present, and future, such that the past and the future impinge on the NOW.

Biblical scholar Charles Cousar describes this paradox this way.

Christ's coming was an eschatological event. It was world-changing; it inaugurated the last times. Though not every individual has been aware of that event and its implications, the event is nevertheless true and impinges on the lives of all.

(*Galatians*, 1982, John Knox Press, Atlanta, p. 84)

So whether we know it or not, whether we acknowledge it or not, whether we profess faith in Christ and are baptized or not, these changes have happened in the world's relationship with God, through Christ. But--when we ARE baptized, we "put on" this changed relationship with God and our worldly group-identifiers lose their defining significance.

If we take that seriously, there are profound implications for our life as a Christian community. The polarities which identify us in the world, which mark us and separate us and cause division and hostility and a sense of superiority and inferiority and even enmity--these are overcome in Christ and that should be reflected in the way we relate to one another in the church. In the first century church community, "Jew or Greek" or "Jew or Gentile" was the biggest tribal divider. They debated for years: was this emerging faith community so tied to its Jewish roots that all Gentiles must fulfill the marks of the Hebrew law in order to be a part? No, says Paul, in fact even the Jews in the faith are no longer bound to the Hebrew law, for we are all freed in Christ. Similarly, in the first century "slave or free" meant the profound polarity between classes. So in the Christian community, does this polarity matter? No, says Paul, we stand as equals before God because of Christ. "Male and female"--does this polarity matter? No, says Paul. Now, if you have any awareness of Christian history and practice in the centuries which followed, you know it did. In my view, this simple phrase reminds us in the church of the equality in which we were created by God, and the equality to which we are called in Christ. We are called to live into this equality, for we are one in Christ.

We are living into the reality made for us by Christ, in which unity overcomes polarities. It does not eradicate differences. But the ultimate mark of our group, our tribe, our identity, is our shared membership in the family of God. And that is a relationship of equals before God.

As we live into this reality in the Christian community, we are also compelled to make it a guiding light in our relationships with others in the world. We practice this reality in church, so that we might witness to it in the world. But a church of one racial or ethnic identity in a diverse society can't practice overcoming the racial divide. A church of one economic class is limited in its ability to practice overcoming the division of class. And a church of one political party or persuasion does not have much opportunity to practice overcoming political polarity. But when we come together as diverse people, and allow Christ to bind us as one--ah, then we are ready to stand against the polarities of our world which divide, or oppress, or deny the full humanity of some. Our witness is to stand for the fundamental equality of all human beings before God, testifying to our common humanity, and the unity of the human family as God's family.

This past week has been one of those weeks in which polarities in our world have been loud and strong. The anger and grief of last weekend's mass shooting in Orlando has raised the decibels of the voices of division. We have heard blame cast between Republicans and Democrats, against Muslims in general and radical Muslims in particular, against gays and against anti-gays, against the gun lobby and

gun control advocates, against immigrants and anti-immigrants. But in many places across the country, there have also been quiet witnesses to our shared humanity, and prayers for the overcoming of division. We held one such service here in our sanctuary yesterday, a service in which those from the community could come together and comfort one another. Just to see the diversity of people who all desire peace and want to work together for that sort of world was message enough, but the message was amplified by the music and prayers and readings which were shared. We were practicing living into the reality that we believe in as Christians—that because of Christ, we are one human family. Some of those in attendance who follow other faiths would not give the credit for this to Christ. But as Christians, we do give him the credit. And we praise God that this is our reality, which we are practicing in the world.

We also practiced this same sort of welcome earlier in the week, at the funeral service for Don Frye, Jr. Don was beloved in the Bozeman community, by many people who live their lives as far from a church as possible. Yet as they came to pay their respects to Don, it is my hope and belief that they experienced a church community in which labels and stereotypes and judgment are cast aside, for we are all one in Christ. And I believe that their witness to those of us who feel very much at home in the church is just as important, for we felt a common bond of sadness, gratitude, and hope as we worshiped God together. We were practicing the end of polarities and the gift of unity.

The polarities don't need to define us. Perhaps you heard about the Orthodox Jewish rabbi in Washington, D.C. who led members of his synagogue to a gay bar last Sunday evening. They weren't sure what they'd find when they got there, but when they did, they discovered out that it was predominantly frequented by gay African-Americans—so in their kippot, this group of a dozen Jews, men and women, stood out. But when they told one man that they were there as an act of solidarity, one night after the Pulse nightclub had been targeted, they were warmly welcomed inside. And it turned out that when they talked with one another, they had much in common. The bartender shut off the music and the crowd became silent, and the rabbi said a prayer and lit memorial candles on the bar ledge. They all put their arms on each others' shoulders, and sang soulful tunes. Then one of the Jews bought a round of beer for all. The rabbi writes,

I learned that when a rabbi and members of an Orthodox synagogue walk into a gay African American bar, it is not the opening line of a joke but an opportunity to connect; it is an opportunity to break down barriers and come together as one; it is an opportunity to learn that if we are going to survive, we all need each other.

(Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/06/15/what-happened-when-an-orthodox-jewish-congregation-went-to-a-gay-bar-to-mourn-orlando>)

That's a set of life lessons we all need to learn, over and over. Christ makes this a reality; Christ teaches us this reality; Christ shows us this reality; Christ is this reality. We are more than our demographic. We are less than our labels. We are one in Christ.

So let's practice living like we believe it.