

Departing Without Leaving, Part 2
Feb. 14, 2016
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
Rev. John Cleghorn
Text: Galatians 3:26-29

I found a note on the pulpit this morning, along with this mask, which belongs to Captain Panther. The note reads:

"I am sorry I cannot be with you today. I had hoped to be there to thank you for donating so much food for hungry families in Charlotte. But, after the Super Bowl, I was just too depressed. I will plan on seeing you next year. Keep pounding. Captain Panther."

Well, we all know a little how he feels don't we? You could feel the collective disappointment on Monday morning, like a pall draped over the city. As with Captain Panther, we will be all right. It's just going to take a little while.

Several of you noted how galvanizing a force this Panther team was. In these divisive days when a feeling of community is so desperately needed, the Panthers brought us together, across all of our differences. You didn't have to be a big football fan to be drawn into the fun and the joy.

And, let's remember, that is what it was all about. Football is only a game, after all. The Panthers are not going to solve world hunger, cure cancer, fix our schools or house our homeless. That's not really their job. But they can give us a sense of community, a sense that we belong to each other by belonging to something larger than all of us.

Faith can do the same thing. In fact, I would say that is one of the greatest gifts our faith can give us.

Long before North Carolina and South Carolina were united by a football team, there was a North Galatia and a South Galatia, what is modern day Turkey. Faith created a community there.

In the first decades after Christ, the Apostle Paul began at least one church in that region. As was his method, Paul started a church there and then moved on to start others. Not long afterward, though, a controversy bubbled up when some missionaries came to settle among the Galatians. They claimed that the old Hebraic Law, the law of Moses and the early Israelites, still dictated that new believers in Christ needed to be circumcised to become recognized as Christians.

It was a debate about identity, what's required – and what it means - to be "in Christ." The letter Paul wrote to those early believers – which we know as Galatians in the Bible – still speaks a vital word to God's people. It is a word that has much to say to us in our own social context of diversity and pluralism – in America, in Charlotte and here at Caldwell.

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Last week, we stepped out on what we might call a “Pilgrimage of Paradox” in our faith. We began thinking about what it means to “Depart Without Leaving.” That idea seems to make no sense at all ... at least until we realize that some departures have nothing to do with physical, geographic travel. Indeed, some departures – sometimes the most meaningful departures – call us to stay where we are, but, at the same time, escape who we are that we might learn more about our brother and sister in Christ.

This language of “departing without leaving” comes from Yale theologian Miroslav Volf. A native of Croatia, he watched his country be torn apart by different factions and peoples. This experience called him to a ministry of reconciliation and peacemaking. One of his best known works is a book titled *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. In it, he writes these words:

At the very core of the Christian identity lies an all-encompassing change of loyalty, from a given culture with its gods to the one God of all cultures. A response to a call from that God entails rearrangement of a whole network of allegiances.

An “all-encompassing change of loyalty.” That’s a pretty big idea. It’s an even bigger challenge. Or, we can receive it as a gift of our faith, a new identity that forever shapes everything else about us.

That same gift is what the Apostle Paul expressed in his letter to the church in Galatia. It’s how he described what it means to be “in Christ.” Paul wrote that to be “in Christ” is to live in an alternative community, one that stands apart from all of the divisions and distinctions our world would impose on us, a world Paul described where:

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (3:28)

That line from Galatians is familiar to most if not all of us. It describes what we might think of as our destination as we “depart without leaving.” Our invitation to depart comes as we begin Lent, a season, after all, that draws us to the foot of the cross, where Christ died that we would all be set free from the world’s power to divide us.

So, let me make three brief points about how Paul’s words in Galatians 3 (found on page 178 in your pew Bibles) can guide our pilgrimage over these 40 days.

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First, we should not make this departure – we should not take up this pilgrimage – without understanding that our aspiration to be one in Christ calls for that to be our primary identity. To be “in Christ” is to put that aspect of our existence, our essence, our very being, first, above every other way we might think of ourselves.

An identity “in Christ” is not just another label we add. It is to be more important – more influential, more formative, more essential – than our gender, our race, our social

station, our sexual orientation. It is to be more important than our place as Charlotteans or North Carolinians, Democrats or Republicans or Independents, members of Caldwell Presbyterian Church or any other church or denomination, Panthers fans or even Bronco fans, what we do for a living, what our hobbies may be or what our favorite flavor of ice cream may be.

It is to submit and to live as if none of those things is more important than whether we pledge allegiance to the alternative community that serves and is shaped by Christ Jesus.

In this unity, we can be reborn as true members of one family, as children of God, as the family of faith.

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But, this unity is not meant to be uniformity. That is my second point.

The call to be one in Christ is a gift, an invitation to be liberated from all the ways the world would divide us. But we should be equally clear about what a primary identity in Christ does not mean.

It does not mean that we are to wipe out the rest of who we are. It does not mean that we are to abandon all those things that make us individual children of God, each with unique gifts, experiences, perspectives and stories. And it surely does not mean that we are to think we live in a so-called post-racial society or, as some people may claim, we to be so-called “color blind.” In fact, those claims are the opposite of what it means to be truly “in Christ” as servants of justice and peace.

For to live in those ways would be to deny the gifts of God’s vastly varied and marvelous creation. To look past our individuality would be an insult to our God. To close our eyes to the fact that our world – and its systems and institutions – holds entire groups and peoples hostage is simply a lie. To live in that fictitious fantasy-land would be to walk away from God’s call to continue to build God’s kingdom on earth as a place that honors, respects and enables all of God’s people with the equity and justice each one deserves.

As New Testament scholar Richard Hays writes, “If the church is to be a sign and foretaste of the new creation, it must be a community in which gender distinctions – like ethnic and social distinctions . . . have lost their power to divide and oppress.”

Let us go back to our Panthers. They may wear the same jersey, but each brings individual skills to the team. Each comes out of their own unique story. Some are first-round picks. Some are chosen in the last round. Some are not even picked at all, but they find a way to make the team.

Each is on the team for a specific reason, for a specific skill. Their jersey color may be the same, but no two numbers are the same and each player has his own individual name across the back of that jersey.

In Paul's words to the Galatians, "As many of you were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." (v. 27)

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That brings me to my third point: that the new identity we receive in baptism is one of liberation.

Last Wednesday, many of you came to our Ash Wednesday service. Those who came forward to receive a mark of ashes heard me say these words:

"From dust we come and to dust we return. I invite you to die to yourself, that you might receive new life."

Some may hear those words and think: "Well, that's not very hospitable. I come to church and you tell me to die to myself."

But Jesus gave us those words, certainly not me. That is indeed what our Lenten pilgrimage is all about, isn't it? We are to die to ourselves, because we never belonged to ourselves in the first place. And in that is our liberation, set free to be God's above all else.

Baptism is at the heart of Paul's message to the Galatians. Our identity in Christ does not come from circumcision. It comes from our baptism, our becoming one with and for Christ.

Paul goes on to say:

"And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."

"... heirs according to the promise." There is a lot packed into those five simple words. As heirs, you see, we receive something we did not earn. Something that is passed down to us regardless of whether we deserve it. But it comes with an obligation. Our inheritance is part of a promise that we are to continue to make, again and again, as new brothers and sisters are called and claimed by their baptism.

So, this very day, we have made a promise to little Evan Ashley. What a joy he has already become to us all, thanks to the graciousness and generosity of his momma and daddy. As I sit up on the chancel as worship proceeds every Sunday, I see him handed around so lovingly. Some of you can hardly wait for your turn to hold him. It's like a big

Presbyterian mosh pit out there. He just seems to surf around the sanctuary, always with a sweet smile and wide eyes. Just don't fumble like Mike Tolbert, much less twice.

But with the gift and the joy of his presence comes a responsibility, a responsibility to participate with God to fulfill a promise, the same promise we affirm with every baptism we celebrate. And what is that promise?

It is a promise to work for a world that honors and celebrates our God-given differences and, in doing so, bear witness to our belief that Christ reigns victorious over the power of those differences to divide us.

So, today, as a people who are one in Christ, we promise to little Evan that we will celebrate the gift of being male and female while also working to bring about gender equality in all aspects of our life together.

Today, as a people who are one in Christ, we promise to Evan to lift up and honor the various gifts of our many races and ethnicities while confessing our sin and recommitting to work against racism and its ongoing hold on our life together as a nation.

Today, as a people who are one in Christ, we promise to Evan that we will welcome and be blessed by people, regardless of which sexual orientation God gave them while continuing to stand against hate and homophobia.

Today, as a people who are one in Christ, we promise to Evan that we will work as hard as we can to recognize the pernicious effects of male patriarchy and white power and privilege ... that the society he will know will be one in which all people can realize all of their God-given gifts in life.

God's people, you see, have always been pilgrims, called to depart, to walk in our liberation in Christ, to escape the captivity of ourselves ... all that we can more fully embrace the one we might think of as "the other," all that we might draw closer to our God.

As I closed last week's sermon, let us pray for pilgrims' hearts.