

The Only Thing, Part 1

Oct. 30, 2016

Caldwell Presbyterian Church

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Scripture: Galatians 3:26-28, 5:2-6

This week I found myself thinking back over the 8 to 9 years I have been standing in this spot and some of the themes that have marked our time together.

When we first began back in 2007 and 2008, one word that popped up a lot – in my sermons and in our conversation - was uncertainty. Those were the days of the Great Recession, the deepest economic slump in America since the 1930s. We saw unemployment and under-employment, foreclosures and bankruptcies. We all wondered whether we were in that so-called “new normal.” We clung to our Lord, our scripture and each other to get through, which we did.

Not long afterward, we found ourselves at a tipping point in the national psyche as to the equality of LGBT people. Would we see them as children of God, fully deserving of our love and justice, as much, that is, as any others? And despite last-gasp efforts of the fearful in the form of Amendment One and HB2, we have, overall, seen breathtaking advancement in the equal and just treatment of our LGBT sisters and brothers.

Along the way, of course, we elected the first African-American president, not once but twice. Those [presidential] races brought out the best and the worst in humanity. Closer to home, our city has been confronted with the reality that is it not one city but two, one affluent, comfortable and hopeful and one frustrated, impatient and close to hopeless.

Over these years, we have sought the wisdom of the prophets and their provocation to justice. We have found comfort in the Psalms. We’ve plumbed the teachings and parables of Christ and we have walked with the first-Century Christians as they gave birth to a global religion.

Now we are once again in the final days of a presidential election and we are, once again as a nation, more divided than ever. It was only eight years ago that the commentators began describing the nation as a mix of so-called red and blue states. Now we are fractured along not just those lines but so many others – lines of economic status, lines of geography in whether we live in a city or in a rural area, lines of gender, race, sexual orientation and ideas about immigration. We seem to be on one side or another of this central question: Will we embrace our future in faith or be fearful of it?

Through it all, as Christians, we have constantly sought to answer another fundamental question: Who are we? Who are we as followers of Christ? Who are we as those who believe the kingdom of God has broken through in Christ but is hardly yet complete?

Who are we as those who seek to bear witness to an alternative way of living rooted in and continually shaped by God's work in the life and teachings, death and resurrection of Christ our Lord?

These all boil down to the question of identity. What is the Christian identity? What makes us different as Christians? Not better, mind you, but different, definitely different.

Today in our denomination is known as Reformation Sunday. Churches around the world today lift up our five-hundred year old heritage and ask: What does it have to say to today's issues and crises? Does the reading of scripture, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, still speak? Do we believe God is still sovereign, even in those days when God can seem awfully absent?

Do we believe there is real power in the people of the church, not just in its ordained ministers, but in the pews to bring their faith alive? Can we escape the accusation that we are just the frozen chosen and transform the world in a way that gives fresh expression to our historical claims and doctrines?

The question of identity was the central question in Paul's letter to the Galatians. Today, I invite you into a three-week season with that epistle. Full disclosure: It is the scripture that stands at the heart of my work toward a doctorate. So, perhaps somewhat selfishly, I want you to walk with me in exploring what this old letter has to say in today's pluralistic social, political, cultural and economic context.

The presenting issue in Galatians was this: Did followers of Christ have to undergo circumcision as a physical sign of their identity? Was it mandatory for Christians to mark themselves – quite literally – with circumcision to signify how their belief in Christ connected to God's first covenant with Abraham?

Some were telling the early believers at Galatia that, at least. Paul had helped the assembly there get started and then left. But others had come and were insisting that Christ's followers must be circumcised.

The danger for us, of course, is that this all seems so very arcane and disconnected from our lives, beside the fact that the mention of circumcision makes men squirm. Mention circumcision in a sermon and men immediately start thinking about football. Or anything else. Anything else!

But the debate in Galatia about forty years after Christ wasn't really about circumcision. It was about what God in Christ had offered the world. And that's what Paul focused on in his letter.

His response is that “in Christ” we are all made one. No physical mark is needed because a great and all-encompassing spiritual mark has been made upon us by God’s activity in Christ. Paul felt so strong about that claim that, in Galatians, he makes one of his most radical statements:

“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ,” Paul wrote. Then Paul went to even greater lengths to make his point:

“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.”

It’s hard for us to understand just how radical Paul’s statement was at the time. In one sentence, he threw out eons of cultural traditions and distinctions. Then and now, human instinct was to look for difference, difference in physical looks, difference in behaviors and customs, difference in beliefs and loyalties, difference in ethnicity. Then and now, people sought to gather in groups as defined by their similarities, to find safety in tribes.

Then and now – especially in this political season – the idea that peoples of varying differences could affirm each other’s difference and yet find unity amid diversity was explosive stuff. It was enough to get Paul killed eventually.

That’s just how powerful those two words, “in Christ,” truly are. In Christ, everything changed. In Christ, God offered all people liberation from the shackles that keep us tied down to one perspective, forever apart. In Christ, God flattened the mountains and filled in the valleys that keep us separated. In Christ, God offered us the chance to be one, to claim one identity over and above any other.

Radical stuff indeed. So radical that it still eludes us, thousands of years later. So threatening an idea that cynical and power-hungry politicians use it to keep us divided, to foster fear and the myth of safety in radical individualism.

So powerful are those two words, “in Christ,” that they can also still inspire us today. It is not at all a stretch to extend Paul’s words in Galatians 3:26. We can say that in Christ there is no homosexual or heterosexual or transgender, but only children of God. We can say that in Christ, there is room for both seeker and convicted believer. We can say that in Christ, there can be no black or white or Asian or African and on and on. In Christ, there is no Republican or Democrat or Independent.

But, oh, how we let those differences define us against God’s will.

Last week we held our quarterly meeting of the 100 or so churches of the Charlotte Presbytery. In worship, we sang a Mississippi-blues inspired confession of how we let our differences get in the way of what God has in mind.

Here is the chorus and one verse:

*God don't hate the Muslims
God don't hate the Jews
God don't hate the Christians
But we all give God the blues
God don't hate the atheists
The Buddhists or the Hindus
God loves everybody
But we all give God the blues.*

*God loves old bartenders
The preachers, whores and fools
And that Karaoke singer
Just a ruinin' "Don't be cruel"
The winners and the losers
The prisoners and the free
All the saints and all the sinners
Even you and even me.*

Just think - if we sang that at a Presbytery meeting, maybe there is hope for us after all.

* * *

So with this powerful, ever expansive knowledge of just how wide a space we have been given in Christ, how do we live it out? The question of identity doesn't just deal with "who" we are, but "how" we demonstrate our intended identity to the world around us.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul offers a range of his ideas as an answer to that question. We can get to that in the weeks to come, before we begin Advent at the end of November.

For our remaining time today, let me lift up one verse. I chose it because it must be one of the most concise, most concrete, most sensible verses in all of scripture. As I have dwelled on Galatians, I have wondered how this one line did not emerge alongside the Golden Rule, the Great Commandment or the Great Commission.

In chapter 5, Paul is saying yet one more time that circumcision counts for nothing thanks to Christ's unifying victory. Paul says with pristine clarity, "the only thing that counts is faith working through love."

Can it get any clearer than that? Amid all of scripture's density, mystery and even in its own self contradictions, Paul gives us this overlooked gem in Galatians 5:6.

"The only thing that counts is faith working through love."

Do you see what I mean about this verse getting short shrift in the pantheon of scripture verses?

"The only thing that counts is faith working through love."

Why don't we see these few but powerful words on billboards on the interstate? Why did that guy that used to get on TV during NFL games hold a sign that heralded those words?

"The only thing that counts is faith working through love."

We can, I should warn, over-simplify it. Any one piece of scripture is illuminated by all other scripture. That is one of our claims in the Reformed tradition.

But it sticks, doesn't it? And what might faith working through love look like?

Is this some lofty, ethereal notion, or is it gospel living that is "sound and on the ground," as I heard one preacher ask recently?

We can start with what it probably doesn't look like. IF we are honest, it doesn't look like being as vastly segregated as our city has become. Rather than being one in Christ, rather than sharing all things in common as the apostles did, we are the ninth most racially segregated city in the United States, a reality that has sown the seeds of our recent unrest.

Faith working through love doesn't look like the dangerously divisive rhetoric that incites revolution and violence as spread by the man who would be king.

What then might it look like?

Perhaps it looks like the courage shown over the last 8 weeks by those in our "Troubling the Waters" class, the courage to confess how whiteness can cripple all of our good intentions and aspirations to justice.

Perhaps it looks like our Touchpoint ministry, which plans an equally deep dive into understanding what it means to be transgender and how we can extend gracious hospitality to transgender people.

Maybe that's what faith working through love looks like.

Perhaps it's all of the commitments so many have made thus far to serve God with your time, talent and treasure, each a promise in return to God's promises to us.

Maybe that's what faith working through love looks like.

Perhaps it's the simple act of one of you reaching out to another with a meal or an invitation to see a movie to fill one person's otherwise lonely days.

Maybe that's what faith working through love looks like.

Perhaps it is taking up the mantle of being a bridge-builder and a peace-maker in whatever context you are in, manifesting what Paul in Galatians calls the fruits of the spirit – joy, peace, patience, kindness and self-control rather than what Paul calls the works of the flesh - strife, anger, quarrels, dissensions and envy.

More than anything, friends, we can say this. We can proclaim this: More than anything, faith working through love looks like Jesus on the cross, the deliverer of grace, the wounded healer, the one who offers hope and reconciliation across anything that would divide or defeat us.

Amen.