

Oct 28 – All Saints Sunday – Children of God

Galatians 3: 26-29, 4:6-7

As we have learned, the churches in Galatia were in an uproar. A group of Torah centered Jewish Christians had come from Jerusalem proclaiming the importance of following all of the Laws of Moses. They said that then, and only then, could you be considered a faithful Christian. Their words were so compelling that some Gentiles had gone through the initiation rites required of those converting to the Jewish faith. Others had rejected these ideas reminding all that they had been considered faithful Christians until these people arrived. It had split the churches and now each side was proclaiming that the other was wrong. This division and rancor had made Paul very angry and so he had written the letter. We have heard how he thought the ideas presented by these other missionaries were not just wrong but a perversion of the Gospel. He shared his Apostolic call from Jesus as the authority needed to do things in a new way. He challenged old traditions that relied on the law instead of God's grace. He had gone clear back to Abraham to show that righteousness was centered in belief, not in actions. After challenging and, in Paul's mind, destroying the doctrines the others had presented, Paul now begin the process of healing the divisions within these churches. Beginning with these verses we start to hear a call to embrace a new understanding of unity and a challenge to love without labels.

He begins, "You are all God's children through faith in Christ Jesus." Paul goes on to say that they are now "God's sons." We need to understand that Paul was referring to all, male and female, even if he uses the term son. He uses this phrase because Paul was making a very important point. The title "Sons of God" was employed in the Old Testament as a designation for Israel as God's elect people. In Deut 14:1 we hear, "You are sons of the Lord your God...for you are a people holy to the Lord your God." Do you see how he is beginning to blur the distinction between Gentile and Jew? The Jews had always seen themselves as a special called out people holy to the Lord. Now Paul is saying all who believe in Christ can claim this title. The reason he can make this claim is because they had all undergone baptism. We understand that

Gentiles were baptized into the faith but we sometimes forget that Jews also were baptized into the Christian faith as well.

Paul wants them to grasp the idea that the rules of faith they had grown up with were behind them and now they were all living a new life in Christ to which all had been baptized. Paul, without saying it in so many words, is proclaiming that there is a third category now beyond Jew and Gentile which would come to be known as Christians. Paul then, scholars believe, quotes part of an early Christian baptismal formula. He says, they are neither Jew nor Greek but one with Christ. He went further destroying the distinction between male and female, slave and free. All are one in Christ and we are now all, through faith, descendants of Abraham and heirs according to the promise. We will get back to that last phrase in a moment.

Paul is challenging them to shed, in their minds, all those distinctions that seem so important, faith roots, status or gender. He wants them to focus on the key image that they are one with Christ. These ideas reject what those from Jerusalem were stating, about Jews being the chosen ones and the importance of the Law for faith. The new life in Christ made those old standards and values unimportant. Think about it even now. What would it be like to live such a class free life?

We still deal with issues of equality between men and women, between races, and presumptuous values even creep into the church. We need to continually be reminded that we are one. Whenever we hear people wishing to break us into categories we need to stand firm against it. Because whenever there are categories there are also values given as to who is right, who is important and who comes first.

Paul's passionate rejection of this kind of ethnic/religious identity politics should lead us to reflect carefully on the source of our own identity. To what extent is our sense of who we are grounded in the gospel of Christ, and to what extent is it determined by other factors?

In chapter four, Paul goes on to say God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts. I love that phrase. When we believe, God's gift to us is the Spirit of Jesus. It is placed in our hearts. We don't have to work for it, earn it, be forgiven before we receive

it, follow certain laws to make it happen. None of these are required. It is a gift. I want you to do something. I want you to look around this church and let your eyes rest on a few people. Make sure they are not your friends or people you know well. They might be a person you have chatted with briefly at coffee hour or they may be a person you have not said one word to. Look at them and celebrate that the Spirit of Jesus is in their hearts. This is the sign and pledge of our new status as God's children. Does that idea change your perspective about them? It should. We don't have to know anything about them other than they came to church today. That bond connects us and should shatter all barriers between us. Now, don't you want to get to know that carrier of the Spirit of Christ better? I should think so.

Paul then goes onto say something more, something we can miss. He says this Spirit of Jesus in us compels us to cry out "Abba, Father." This indicates that we now enjoy an intimacy with God that comes only through being part of God's family. Here is something we miss because we do not read this in the original languages. When Paul uses the words Abba and Father he was using an Aramaic word and then a Greek word saying the same thing. Do you see his subtle call to unity. He is suggesting that Jews, who for the most part spoke Aramaic, and Gentiles who mostly spoke Greek, have been called by Christ and the Holy Spirit into a unity of faith. They might use different words but both call God their Father. All have been adopted and therefore enjoy all that rightfully belongs to God's children.

This reminder of our unity in Christ and our call to love one another is so important on a day like today. On this All Saint's Sunday we will celebrate what it means to claim the title, "Child of God." It means we are one in Christ. We celebrate that God placed Jesus' spirit in each of their hearts, they are beloved children of God. And because of this they are heirs, heirs to the promises of Abraham and even more heirs in Christ. Part of our inheritance is the promise of eternal life. That means on a day like today when we light these candles, we do it with a sense of anticipation. Though we grieve for our loss, we grieve with hope. We will see them again. This is our inheritance.

I don't know about you, but these words in Galatians are uncomfortable for me. I don't like to admit that I put people into categories. I don't like to think about how I

sometimes take pride in my status at the expense of others. I don't like to think about when I have said or thought, "I am right, they are so wrong." To see all as brothers and sisters, beloved by God is hard. The less like me they are the harder it becomes. We would be so happy if we lived in a world made up of people just like us who thought the way we did, had the values we did, and believed like we did. It would be comfortable, but boring. This is not the world we live in. We live in a very diverse world that loves to categorize people, that champions status, power and wealth and celebrates when those whom they label as "others" get put in their places. May we look around once more and see each person for the special and beloved person in Christ they are.

Even more, as we leave this place and come across people less like us and maybe less likeable may we remind ourselves that they likely have the Spirit of Christ within them. And even if they don't go to church we need to remember that in God's eyes those categories we think are so important really don't matter. To see beyond the categories to the person and realize that in God's eyes they are of equal value to us may help us to treat them differently. May all we meet be given respect and kindness.