

Psalm 42 ~ Galatians 3:27-29, 5:6

Deep Calls to Deep

June 19, 2022 ~ 2nd Sunday after Pentecost ~ Sacrament of Baptism ~ Father's Day ~ Juneteenth

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Introduction

When was the last time you were really mad? Angry enough to stomp off. Or just give up and shut down. You may have shouted something, or muttered words under your breath that you deeply regretted saying. But it was too late. You couldn't take them back. Good news for us, when Paul got spitting mad at the churches in Galatia that he had founded, he decided to fire off a letter. Yes, the book of the Bible we call "Galatians" is basically Paul's angry tirade. Trying to understand the book of Galatians is something like trying to understand an angry phone call while overhearing only one side. That's right: we have no direct information about the Galatians' side of this conflict that got Paul so bent out of shape.

Yet, the blessings of this angry letter for us are numerous to name. Out of his anger, Paul digs deep to articulate the very heart of his newly found faith. Words that articulate the absolutely radical character and universal scope of God's grace. Words that speak of our mystical unity that goes deeper than the divisions of culture, status, and gender. Paul writes of God's unconditional, undeterrable will to set human beings free from the bondage of sin, free from *all* that separates us from God and one another. No matter *all* the differences that set us apart. And set us at odds with one another all too often.

We are cutting to the chase today, by jumping right into the end of Chapter 3, which begins in v. 1 with, "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" The problem as best we can determine is this: these churches that Paul had founded were now being led by unidentified teachers who were requiring all gentile converts to be circumcised. These teachers clung to the belief that circumcision was necessary to become a member of the new covenant community. Surely this new thing called baptism, wasn't enough. Baptism as the identifier was too new, too different from the way they had always done things.

I want to be clear here: The conflict in this letter is not between Jews and Christians, as is sometimes been interpreted. For us to insert the categories of "Christian" and "Jewish" is actually anachronistic here. We know Galatians was written no later than the mid-50's of the first century, which was before anyone, including Paul, self-identified as a Christian. The conflict that was making Paul so spitting mad was within the Jewish faith community. Something like the conflicts between Protestants and Catholics, or the divisions and schisms within the Christian faith that have spawned, to date, more than 45,000 different Christian denominations globally.

Today, let us dig beneath the spit and salt residue from Paul's angry letter, and recognize the fountainhead these words have become for all subsequent Christian reflection about justification by faith, the cross, the power of the Spirit, and the meaning of Christian freedom. From Augustine to Martin Luther, to our baptizing Oswald Gregory this morning: they and we stand on the promise of Paul's message we are about to read. The deep, radical, unifying grace of God. Let us drink in these words we are thirsting for.

Sermon

My first job after graduating from college, when I was all of 21 years old, was to work as a "Volunteer in Mission" for the Presbyterian church in Newark, New Jersey. The job they gave me was to set up and direct an after-school program out of a downtown Presbyterian church (a mammoth facility that included a bowling alley!) for 3rd – 8th graders who lived up the street, in subsidized housing. Most of the children who attended our program were either African American or Puerto Rican. One rainy day, we were inside sitting around a table drawing on white sheets of paper with crayons and colored pencils. One of the girls said, "Hey, let's draw Ms. Brubaker!" Which was my name at the time. (They must have been really bored.) And then another girl gave me a long look and said, "but she's so white, there's nothing to draw!"

I remember this conversation, now over forty years ago, not only because it made me laugh. But more importantly, she opened my eyes to a whole new perspective on how they saw me. Young people whose skin was a different color than mine. It was also my first experience of being perceived suspiciously when knocking on the doors of the apartments up the street to recruit children to join our program. What was someone who looked like me doing knocking on their door? From their prior experiences, chances are it couldn't be good. Could it?

None of us chooses the circumstances of our birth or the identity markers that make us who we are. Even the religion we choose and the political party we affiliate with spring, in part, from the circumstances of our birth: where we were born, what family we were born into. Whether we continue to align with our family or run like crazy in the opposite direction, the context into which we were born shapes us. And yet these are the markers by which we label, categorize, and judge others. We start, like those Galatians by seeing and sorting others: Jew/Greek, Slave/free, Male/female. We see from Paul, at the very beginning, the very foundation of our faith we are taught to do otherwise. In Christ and through Christ, we are called to see others as Christ sees them: dig down, below skin tone, verbal tone, underneath social structures, below cultural and gender identities and see the deep identity we all share as children of God. Deep calls to deep.

And down there in the deep is good news. Deeper than all the divisions we experience; deeper than all the disparities and differences; deeper than the foundational wounds of our individual lives and of our national identity, is the ocean of God's grace. The well spring of Divine Love that has the power to heal us. We come to church, we open our Bible in order to immerse ourselves again in the deep narratives of our faith, the stories and truth that remind us we are above all and underneath all, God's children. That is our primary identity. No matter where we were born, what we have done, or has been done to us. We hear the Psalmist in our first scripture lesson, turning to deep remembering to touch again, to drink again of the cup of God's grace and mercy: remembering the Exodus. The promises we made to Oswald and to every person we baptize help them tap into our deep remembering: the Exodus, the Exile, the cross and the resurrection: stories of God's deliverance, again and again.

Today is "Juneteenth," so named for what happened on June 19, 1865 in Galveston, Texas when Union Major General Gordon Granger and his troops arrived with the news that the war had ended and that the enslaved were now free. "The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves." June 19 was over two months *after* General Robert E. Lee had surrendered on April 9 in Appomattox, Virginia. But that was a long way from Texas. And that was before telecommunications was a thing. The telephone wouldn't be invented until about ten years later. News traveled slowly back then--So as long as no one told the slaves, how would they find out? June 19 was the real freedom day—at least legally, for the slaves in Texas. Perhaps a second "who knew?" about Juneteenth, is that although African Americans have been celebrating this holiday every year since 1865, most white people were unaware of it until very recently.

"You can in fact be free, but if you don't recognize it, you're going to live like an enslaved person," said Emory University Professor Andra Gillespie as she reflected on the history of Juneteenth. Here is where I see Juneteenth and Paul's letter to the Galatians speak a similar truth to us today. It took over two months for the truth to be told in Galveston, Texas. It took two months for word that the sinful practice of slavery had been ended. That it was no longer legal for humans literally to enslave other human beings, treating as property to be used and abused rather than as children of God. As shameful as this piece of our American history may be, if we leave it there, we are closing our eyes and our hearts to the deep call from Christ, to listen and learn and to work toward healing this foundational national wound.

It's easy to criticize Paul and those first churches for the disconnect between his radical message of equality, and a vision that removes the binaries that bind: Jew or Greek (cultural), slave or free (social) even male and female (gender identity). He did not work to dismantle the perpetuation of hierarchies. Nor did he work to end their system of slavery. And yes, for the most part women would continue to be subordinated to men within the institutional church for two millennia. But before we leap to judgment of Paul or all the ways the early church fell short of this vision, consider this. In two thousand years from now, when people are looking back at us and what is going on right now in the church and the world, what do you suppose they will see. This message from Paul to us is pushing us to ask the hard questions: How are we really doing at dismantling structural racism, classicism, sexism and all the other sinful "isms" that Christ died to free us from? And we have had two thousand years more than Paul's churches to live and learn and do better.

On this Juneteenth day, I have one more thing I want to share about us, white Christians who are listening to this sermon. This is something that I just learned. Through an extensive statistical analysis across the country and across denominations, it was found that two-thirds of practicing white Christians are following in effect, first and foremost a religion of whiteness. What does that mean? In this study they repeatedly placed being white ahead of being Christian; the findings were not explained by political affiliation, location, age, education, income, gender, or other factors.ⁱ So where do we go from here? We need to listen to Paul, to

dig deep and do what we can to shift the focus from our own group or identity, to the biblical essence of God's reign where divine love and justice for all people and all creation. As Ken sang so beautifully moments ago, "Let there be peace one earth, and let it begin with me." And As Paul wrote it to the Galatians and to us: "the only thing that counts is faith working through LOVE."

Let's be honest: it's hard to look at another person beneath their outward appearance, like those girls trying to figure out how to draw their very white teacher on a white piece of paper in Newark, New Jersey. But Christ is calling us to do that. And together we can learn to get better at it. God is giving us a chance to practice this as we prepare to welcome refugees to Marshfield from other lands and cultures. We don't know yet from which country or countries, but we can be pretty sure their culture, their skin tone, and their religion will be different than ours.

It is easy to feel threatened by a person or persons who seem at first glance, to be different than we are. That is a moment when "Deep can call to Deep" and help us to choose peace instead of judgment, hurt, or worse. But how do we go about this, you may be wondering. I am about to give you a take away right now. A tool that you can use anytime, anywhere. It's a practice you could use with a family member whose politics are the opposite of yours, or with a stranger, or even your best friend on earth, when you feel a sudden pang of judgment or an impulse to react impulsively or say something in anger. Here it is:

Pause, close your eyes, breathe and bathe them with love, using this simple prayer:

Breathe in: I see you with Love

Breathe out: gifted, cherished

Breathe in: grateful

Breathe out: for who you are

Let us pray: Parent God, help us look deeply upon one another and recognize your image in one another. Inspire us to join your transforming ministry that protects the weak, challenges the strong, frees the prisoner, proclaims peace and heals the broken. For Christ's sake. Amen.

ⁱ Michael O. Emerson, "Our Churches Are Being Sifted," *Sojourners Magazine*, July 2022, pp.12-13.