

**Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard**  
**“Love One Another”**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**  
**Sunday, June 16, 2019**

**Galatians 3:23-29**

*Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 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. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.*

**Luke 8:26-39**

*Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me'— for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) Jesus then asked him, 'What is your name?' He said, 'Legion'; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.*

*Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.*

*When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, 'Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.' So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.*

Let us pray. Our gracious and living God, you move within our beings and within our assembly. And we pray that we will now be able to listen, that we might listen for the stirrings of your spirit as we hear your word, as we think together on the meaning that you would have us learn. We pray that we will know the guidance of your spirit, and that we will know the deep compassion with which you approach us and all the world. But we pray this in Jesus name. Amen.

I'll have to say that that hymn is one of my favorite ones. And that when I noticed we were singing it, I did pick up on the words of the hymn for the topic of the sermon. And then I think I had a moment of genius in asking Karen to do the children's time [laughter]. I don't think you asked [laughter]. Be that as it may, that was perfect. Thank you very much. It was illustrating what we're all about for our scripture and our sermon this morning. And in a way, I'm not sure I could've. So I'm very grateful to you and glad for the children's time that you did with us.

Our reading is from Galatians, Paul's letter to the Galatians in the third chapter. So listen now for the word of God. Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore, the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian for in Christ Jesus, you were all children of God through faith. And as many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ, there is no longer Jew or Greek. There is no longer slave or free. There is no longer male or female for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs, according to the promise. The word of the Lord. Interesting that these are familiar words that we read here in Galatians, Paul's words. Neither

Jew nor Greek nor slave nor free nor male nor female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. All of you, no exceptions. I'm trusting these are familiar words. If you've been around churches at all for a part of your life or you've tended worship previously, you've undoubtedly heard these. And sometimes the familiar becomes almost too much so - doesn't it? - so that it begins to blunt for us the radical meaning of the words that we're hearing. This radical, almost outrageous, statement on the part of Paul, not just in his time, but I would submit in our time as well. But they were certainly so for Paul. According to his own testimony, Paul had been born and bred within the Jewish community. Not only that, but he was a Pharisee with all that that meant. A Jewish male who was zealous for the law and zealous for the Torah, and as such - don't you see? - he rose every morning and he prayed. And this is what he prayed, "I thank God that I was not born a Gentile, a woman, or a slave," feeling not only blessed that he was male, Jewish, and free but don't you think also probably somehow favored, somehow better than, somehow privileged. And he prayed this every day. I just want you to imagine for a moment doing that every day and what that might do to your head and what that might do for your general outlook on life. So for Paul to come to this point in his life that he would write to the Galatians these words - there's neither Jew nor Greek. There's neither slave nor free. There's neither male nor female - I'm thinking that is beyond amazing. I'm thinking it's an astounding testimony to the transforming power that his encounter with Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus had in his life. It wasn't that he didn't backslide at times. Don't we all? His words about women not speaking in the assembly of the church, I take those to be backsliding, not completely in that moment, overcoming the prejudices with which he had grown up. But in his best and most transformed moments, which this reading in Galatians reflects, his understanding of Christ, his understanding of the Gospel was radical and compelling and utterly faithful to the God whom he had encountered in Jesus Christ on that road to Damascus. And he knew, and it did have radical implications for his time. Now, it wasn't as if it was a new idea. One of the central themes in the Bible and the biblical text-- one of the most central themes, one of the clearest themes is the expansive welcome that is articulated within the pages of the biblical text. Especially welcome for those who might be on the margins, who might not otherwise be included. Over and over in the Hebrew text, we are cautioned to welcome the alien, the foreigner, the stranger, the migrant, if you will. We are cautioned to welcome and care for the widow and the orphan who might find themselves bereft and definitely on the margins economically, overall making it very, very clear that God is one who does not exclude and that God is one who does not discriminate, but instead welcomes and takes care of-- this is one of the clearest, strongest statements, themes in all of Scripture.

There are some things in Scripture that we can take out of context. There are some things we can bend, but not this. This is unequivocal and clear. All are welcome, period. So even though Paul had been a Pharisee and thanked God each day that he was not a woman, not a slave, not a Gentile, he finally could not escape the implications of one of the strongest themes in all of Scripture, and neither can we. Sadly, in our world, where exclusion and division and concentration on difference seem to be the order of the day, in which the justice and compassion of a welcoming, loving God seem to be in short supply, these words, I would suggest to all of us, present new challenges.

One of the most significant lessons that I learned along the way about the challenge and truth of these words of Paul happened to me back in the 1990s. At the time, we were living in Columbia, South Carolina. I was the pastor of one of the churches there, and as such, I was a member of what was called Trinity Presbytery. And this particular Presbytery had established a partnership with the Presbyterian Church of Sudan. Now, you might recall, in the 1990s, this was a time in Sudan's history when they were engaged in a bloody civil war between the northern and southern parts of the country. So the partnership that we had with this church as a Presbytery was dicey. It was problematic, to say the least. It was an adventure, to say the least. But it so happened that one day, the chair of the mission committee of that Presbytery called me up and asked me if I would have breakfast with him. I said, "Sure," not knowing what was coming. When we were having breakfast, he asked me if I would consider being a representative of our Presbytery to go to the southern part of Sudan for three or four days with leaders and people of that church. He informed me I would be going alone, that I would be the only one going from our Presbytery, that I would be, of course, met by people from the Sudanese church, that they would escort me, but that there would be risks. I thought to myself, "Yeah," and that there might be danger, but that the church there and the United Nations were very careful about when and who they let go inside.

But I can remember being really surprised. More than surprised. I think I was in a state of shock when he gave me that invitation. And I looked at him, and I said, "Surely, you're kidding. Surely, there has to be someone in this Presbytery who is much, much more knowledgeable than I am, more appropriate to choose. Why are you asking me to do this? He didn't exactly respond. He just looked back at me with this little smile on his face and said, "Well, we just think you're the right person." "Okay." So what to do? He had to know fairly quickly, and so I thought about it. I prayed about it, and there was something nudging me inside saying, "Go ahead. You can do this." And so I said I would. I flew from the United States to Nairobi, Kenya. You had to go into the south at that time through Kenya. You couldn't go through the northern part of the country. So I flew to Nairobi, and

from there, we flew up to the border of Kenya and Sudan to a town called Lokichogio, where the NGOs and the United Nations all were headquartered in their efforts to provide desperately-needed food and medicine and supplies to people who were caught in the crossfires of this horrible war.

And it was there, in that little town, that we had to wait for permission to go in, and we waited for a couple of days. And I tell you what. I was a nervous wreck by the time they finally said we could go in. And doubts were beginning to fill my mind. I was thinking to myself, "This is just crazy. What possibly could I do when I get inside? What possibly could I say to these people. After a couple of days, I found myself in a small, and I mean small, airplane. There was just four of us. The pilot, a representative of the Sudanese church, a man from the Reformed Church of Holland, and me. We landed on a hardened dirt runway in the village called Akobo, which was right near the Ethiopian border. And when I looked out the airplane, this could not picture I was presented could not have been more alien to my experience. Little mud wall, thatched-roof dwellings. The town had been devastated. It had had electricity at one time, but no more. The hospital, which US Presbyterians had built in the 1940s, had been utterly flattened by bombing. The people in that village had at one point had to flee, walking, of course, into Ethiopia, running for their lives from the war. They spent a year there as refugees until they were finally able to come back to their village. I was aware of all of this as we landed, again, wondering what in the world I was doing there. Wouldn't it have been better just to send the money rather than go over? What would I say and what would I do? It was overwhelming.

When I got off the airplane, there was a large group of people there from the village. They were not greeting us with stares, which they might have [laughter], of course, we were foreigners. Not with fear, not with any kind of begging or a list of demands - I think that's what I might have had - but instead, all I can say is it was a large crowd that was joyous - that's the only word I can think of - a large group of people. They were singing, they were dancing, and they were ready to welcome us and lead us like a parade into that village. And we were led, thus, into that village and ushered into the church, which was a larger building of mud walls, thatched roofs, it was dirt floor, where the whole congregation was gathered. There was much singing again. There was some words of greeting from us and words of greeting from them, and then they all started, and again, singing and dancing. And some of them then came forward with pails of water and sponges, taking off our shoes, rolling up our pant legs - I mean, we weren't just going to have our feet washed - rolling up our pant legs all the way to our knees, and they proceeded to wash our feet. I can only say that the atmosphere was absolutely electric, and there were tears coming down my face. It was a moving gesture of hospitality and welcome. But more than that, it was before my eyes a vision that all are one, that there is, in fact, neither Jew nor Greek nor slave nor free nor male nor female nor Sudanese or American or what have you. It was a picture of the radical profound truth of the Gospel.

And on that day, I saw a people who chose light in their darkness, who chose hope rather than despair. They had every reason to despair. And I learned a lot on that day. I learned that no matter where you're from, that sometimes you are called simply to receive love and gratitude with humility. I learned that all of my anxieties and doubts that I spent a lot of time with on my way over and before we got there, that all of those disappeared in that moment as they spoke of encouragement and hope that our presence, our mere presence, gave to them. I learned that accepting this invitation meant that it was an invitation, in fact, on behalf of a new loving relationship and a new vision. We can rarely, rarely go wrong or mishear the call of Jesus in the giving and receiving of compassion and welcome and love no matter who the other might be. We can rarely go wrong. Each of us hears the call of our Lord, the call of Jesus, in varying ways, for different tasks, but we can always be assured that it is in the service of a gracious compassionate forgiving God. And that the work of compassion and of welcome and of care in all corners of this world, that that work beckons to us, for indeed all are welcome. Amen.