

“No Longer”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Galatians 3:1-9, 23-29
May 28, 2017 — Seventh Sunday of Easter

I took another sip of water, and then I turned to the rabbi and I asked, “How do you not lose hope? How do you not give up and decide that peace will never happen here?”

The most well-known verse from the letter to the Galatians, the piece about there being “no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female,” is fully beautiful and yet seems unattainable and impossible.

I desperately want our divisions to fade away, but they keep becoming starker. I want us to be able to celebrate our diversity, while finding our common humanity to be reason enough not to try to control each other with laws and hatred and weapons. But then those in power and those who seek power step up to microphones and remind us that our differences must be divisive, that we are exceptional and those people over there are not, and that those people want to hurt us. There are Republicans and Democrats, good Christians and fake Christians, Americans and Everyone Else, Us and Them. Paul’s words would be mocked and ignored in today’s discourse.

Ah, but his words were mocked and ignored in his own day. That’s the very problem here. Paul established the churches of Galatia, bringing these Gentiles into the fold. But now, in his absence, his beloved Galatians have been wooed by other teachers. These teachers have been saying that the Galatians have to follow Jewish law if they want to be a part of the new covenant.

Remember that Paul was a Pharisee. He’d spent his career committed to preserving Jewish law and making it part of daily life, not just something that happened in the temple. So Paul knows the law. He loves the law. But he has come to a new understanding through his experience of the risen Christ. Paul describes the law as a “disciplinarian” that guarded the people until Jesus. But “disciplinarian” is an awkward translation of the Greek. Paul is describing the law as kind of like a nanny who walks the kids to school and back. It guides and protects and keeps the children of God in line, but for Paul, the children grow up and mature in the event of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. They no longer need the law in the same way.

In chastising the Galatians for listening to these false teachers, Paul makes arguments that first line up with his Jewish tradition, and then move into a new realm. He wants the Galatians to see that their faith is akin to Abraham’s, and so God welcomes them and gifts them righteousness in the same way that God did so for Abraham. And God was blessing the Gentiles through Abraham, even way back then.

But God is also doing a new thing. *Before*, the law was the guardian, the nanny, the disciplinarian. *Now*, those who have clothed themselves with Christ have outgrown the law. A new age has come. A new reality has rattled the earth. Don’t you see, silly Galatians? You are not from the law. The law is not how God found you. The Spirit has been poured out upon you. Don’t listen to these false teachers, trying to act like the death and resurrection of Christ hasn’t changed everything. Those who grew up with the law

are changed. Those who were apart from the law are changed. Everything is changed. The old distinctions no longer matter. Don't you see, dear Galatians? Everything is changed. "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."

Don't let them do this to you. To us. Jesus came to break down things that separate one person from another — things that separate people from God. Now these new teachers want to create categories, different levels of faith. What has that to do with death and resurrection? What has that to do with the Spirit? Nothing. Everything is changed. We are one.

The descendants of Abraham before and after Paul have all done a pretty nifty job of creating categories and litmus tests and throwing in some violence for good measure. Okay, lots of violence. Comedian George Carlin used to talk about how drivers who are going faster than you are all maniacs with death wishes, while drivers going slower than you are all yellow-bellied idiots. The same holds for people of faith, no? Conservative Jews think Orthodox Jews are stuck in the mud while Reform Judaism is a free-for-all. We find the same phenomenon in Islam. And not just in Christianity, and not just Presbyterian Christianity, but I'm willing to bet there are some in this room right now who think this congregation is led by a pastor who is too liberal, and others who think he's not liberal enough. Of course, that's the joy of being diverse. But what about when those distinctions turns into persecution and war? Let's not forget that there was a time not long ago — I was in high school — when a terrifying explosion in the U.K. was most likely the result of a fight between Catholic and Protestant Christians.

And we haven't even gotten to interfaith questions. When you start having Jews, Muslims, and Christians having to deal with each other, the sense of shared humanity can get lost quickly. Crusades, institutionalized anti-Semitism, and radical fundamentalism are easy to throw stones at. But do any of us truly find it easy to consider the humanity of a person in another country whose culture and customs we don't understand? I remember going to visit a friend in high school and emerging from the subway into a Hasidic neighborhood in Queens. Everywhere I looked, I saw hats and dark coats and beards and curls of hair. I had encountered Hasidic Jews, of course, but I'd never been outnumbered like that, on their turf. They seemed so foreign. They seemed bizarre. But they were my neighbors. They were Americans. They were New Yorkers. Weren't they?

I know that the Hasidim and I are not one in Christ. But surely we are one in the God of Israel. Yet the distinctions seem entrenched.

It was last Thursday that I had dinner with the rabbi. He and his wife Julie drove from the city of Karmiel to Tiberias, on the Sea of Galilee, to eat with me and Amber at our hotel. Rabbi Tsvi and I had worked together intensely as chaplains in Chicago. Back then, we would reflect together, and challenge each other, and talk about theology and New York. Tsvi was born and raised in Manhattan, but this is his second stint living in Israel. He was a rabbi there at a Conservative synagogue about ten years ago. And now he's back, and he just started a social work degree. He can't help but try to help people.

Israel is a beautiful place, but even a cursory look at the past seventy years of conflict in the Holy Land leaves the most creative minds at a loss as to a solution that would be fair and just and long-lasting for all of Abraham's descendants. My hearts breaks for the Jewish people. My heart breaks for Palestinians — both Muslim and Christian. My heart breaks for the violence done by leaders all around. My heart

breaks for the history of Judaism. My heart breaks for Muslims living today in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, who live surrounded by walls and checkpoints. My heart breaks for the average person, who simply wants to live a life in peace.

“How do you not lose hope? How do you not give up and decide that peace will never happen here?”

The rabbi looked up at me through his glasses with a broad grin. “I believe in the impossible. I’m a Jew. I have to believe in the impossible!”

Stabbings in Portland. Shootings in Egypt. A dozen other stories we miss.

We seem so far from the new thing God has done in Christ Jesus. It seems two thousand years ago. It seems out of reach in front of us, ungraspable. And yet we are connected to a people who believe in the impossible: descendants for Abraham and freedom from Egypt and a land that flows with milk and honey and a God who keeps promises and return from exile and restoration when calamity has struck. And the new thing we celebrate is a belief in the impossible: God yearning for us, a death that redeems, resurrection, and life everlasting.

Perhaps, then, the things that divide us can be interesting, but secondary. Perhaps, then, the distinctions give way to looking one another in the eye and saying, “How is it with your soul?” Perhaps, then, our differences can be fodder for humor and poetry and storytelling, keeping us so enthralled that we forget how to kill one another. Perhaps, then, a day will come when we have to remember Memorial Day itself, for their are no more dead soldiers.

Perhaps. Not likely. Probably not. Almost certainly not. Unless, of course, you believe in the impossible.