

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, June 19, 2016
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Galatians 3:23-29
“Children of God Through Faith”

Many of you who have siblings would relate to me when I say that growing up with 3 sisters, I often asked myself the question “we grew up in the same home, with same parents, with the same values, how can we think so differently!” and yes, I always asked this question out of frustration! Same parents, same family – yet different genes, different birth order, different interaction outside of home and we end up with different characters who perceive and interact with the world and other people in such different ways.

Taking my family for an example, we have 4 girls who look different and who have different personalities. I’m sure we were born with different personalities but I believe birth order influenced our personalities as well. Not only do birth orders affect everyone differently, same event in the same family can affect everyone differently because of the different ages they are in. My family immigrated to Canada in 1998, I was in grade 7 at the time, my younger sister was in grade 5. My older sisters were in high school, grade 10 and grade 13. You can imagine just how different immigration experience must have been simply because of age.

Well there are times our family has to make a decision. Sometimes, it’s as little as figuring out what to buy for a father’s day gift. It doesn’t seem like a big deal, but when we make a decision together, you can really see our differences in personality. One initiates the conversation on how we have to decide what to buy but can’t make a decision, one simply says “I’ll just chip in if you figure it out,” the other two come up with many ideas, and one of those two is usually the ones who go out shopping, look for what we have discussed, buy it and wrap it and so on. And sometimes, we get pretty frustrated, trying to make a small decision like that together.

Well recently, our family faced a major decision that one of our family members made. It was a very important decision, so important, that once again, every single member of my family reacted differently. There were many phone calls and after a few days, we noticed how our opinions divided into two. But fortunately, in the end, we all decided on the same things, and realized that what matters to our family is supporting one another. Different opinions – but we realized that we care for the same thing – and that is to love and support one another.

Sometimes, when we are trying to make a decision or when we get so stuck on our opinions, we can only see the differences within the group – and those differences can seem irreconcilable.

Try to imagine what it could have been like for the first church, facing a change that no one else had faced in the history. The church had both the Jews and the Gentiles. The Jews have been the keeper of the law – their culture was their religion. And now with Jesus, a new age had dawned. But what does it mean to have Gentiles – the non-Jews – in the same faith group?

It posed an extremely deep theological question. God made promises to Abraham and Abraham’s heirs. Gentiles are not natural heirs. So how does God’s promise apply to them? The Jews have been the chosen people of God for centuries, and now Gentiles are as well?

There must have been different opinions about this issue. It seems like some claimed that everyone should be circumcised. Apostle Paul argues otherwise – he says that to keep one part of the law, the circumcision, only opens a door to requiring that gentile keep the whole law, and that will undermine the foundational gospel claim that human righteousness is the result of divine action, not human obedience.

What Paul argues here in today's text is that law is like a tutor – God gave the law because of transgressions and it exposed selfishness and self-righteousness. It uncovered rebelliousness against God. It was a gift from God to guide people, until Christ came.

And the new theology that God was showing the people of God was that they were baptized into Christ, and that it was God's work – not the work of the law or of the work of the people to obey. And although God chose the Israelites as the people of God to carry this law, God was showing them that God's work extends to all people. Paul goes on to say that they have clothed themselves with Christ – not clothed themselves with being Jews or Gentiles, being women or men, or being slaves or free. And finally, Paul says, if they belong to Christ, they are all Abrahams' offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Think about the church in the modern world, the different issues we face, and the different responses we have. Think of all the different traditions in the world with different cultures; Catholic, Reformed, Presbyterian, Anglican, Baptist, Amish, I can go on and on. And think about how different those traditions are in different parts of the world. They were all impacted by different histories and cultures. Take Presbyterians for an example. There is Presbyterian church in Canada but the Korean Presbyterians who belong to other Presbyterian churches in the world may have very different theologies and understanding of the Bible. We have "evangelicals" and "liberals" – we often label each other with such terms. Think about the current issue we face within the PCC – mainly our position on inclusion of LGBT community. For some churches, it is not a big issue mostly because majority of the congregation stand in the same position, while some churches struggle with this issue so much because there is no majority. They divide in half, and they feel that it is central to their Christian belief and struggle to be the same body when they divide on such an issue.

Worldwide, we face issues such as poverty, gender inequality, ecological crisis, violence, unjust distribution of wealth and we have such different responses to all of them. And many times, these different responses are so different that they are the complete opposite.

Yet, we are all children of God, baptized into Christ, have clothed ourselves with Christ, and belong to Christ.....

Yes, I know just how vague this sounds.

But as I talked about my family – how we were able to go through a time of major change in our family despite all the different opinions and different emotional responses we had, because we focused on the common purpose – I believe that shifting our focus to the word of Apostle Paul will change something. Apostle Paul urge us to think about what it means to be children of God, baptized into Christ, clothing ourselves with Christ and belonging to Christ, and focusing on those words, instead of our different opinion, may change the way we response to the changes and issues within our church and society today. It's father's day and I couldn't help but to wonder what it would be like for my father to look at us four girls, so unique and different. And I couldn't help but to wonder what God would think of all the diversity in God's children in this world. But one thing we hold in common is that we believe in God our father, one who have initiated good work in all of our lives, brought us together as one family by baptizing us into Christ. We are clothed with Christ and we belong to Christ. And these words of Apostle Paul tell us that faith is not just an individual matter, connecting us individuals to Christ, but it is communal, and it is about how we live as a body of Christ. We are *all* children of God.