

Isaiah 65:1-9; Psalm 22:19-28;
Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I hail from a small town in northwest Pennsylvania. It is a place which gets considerably more snow in winter than here, and cools off more on a muggy summer night. It is a place where people root for the Pittsburgh Pirates, and would never claim allegiance to the Orioles or admit to being a Philly Fanatic. It is a place where barbecue is called “sloppy joes”, soda is called “pop”, and pot pie has a flaky crust over it. I’ve lived in south-central PA for over 16 years now, but for a long time there, I found us to be different, you and I.

Even within this congregation, which has existed for over 100 years, there is diversity, and new faces joining us in worship. Not everyone here hails from the borough of Camp Hill. Certainly not everyone was born and raised Lutheran. We pastors move around to lead the different services, see these new faces, struggle to learn new names, struggle to get to know new people. Ministry, I admit, can seem a little difficult in such an environment. How am I to proclaim to you the good news of God in Jesus Christ in a way that will reach you and your particular life situation when sometimes I know only a little about you? Or when I don’t know you at all? How are you to minister to one another when there are new faces all the time, or when you attend various services here, depending upon your week, and when we are all so different from one another? These are questions that must be wrestled with in every church in every place.

When I was in my 3rd year in seminary, serving an internship like our Vicar Behenna here at Trinity, I was given another task of ministry in addition to my serving two small congregations. I spent four hours each week as chaplain at Bethesda Youth Services, a home for court-assigned youth (what years ago were termed “juvenile delinquents”.) There I was, chaplain to 40 youth between the ages of 13 and 17. Forty troubled, angry youth. Every sad and tragic label that could be attached to them was represented: The runaway, the truancy problem, the abused child, the burglar, the gang member, the prostitute.

So there I was. Oh, I was informed that, after three months, if I wanted to, I could quit, taking those four-hours-per-week at Bethesda Home and attach them to one of the two congregations I served. Pretty tempting. In fact, after three months, that’s exactly what I had decided to do. It wasn’t that I didn’t care about the kids. In spite of their anger and bitterness, they were sometimes easy to love, not unlike some of the more cantankerous curmudgeons that exist in every congregation. But I was so aware of the differences between us. I, Nancy Rouse, who had never soaped a window or toilet papered someone’s front yard or short-sheeted a friend’s bed . . . I, who had never been grounded by her parents or served detention in school . . . I, who had never done anything daring and nearly illegal . . . I was supposed to minister to these kids? When I walked in those buildings, I felt as if I had the word “NAÏVE” written all over my face, and “GOODY-TWO-SHOES” branded on my back. Plus the fact that the majority of the kids were bigger and taller than I . . .

Would those youth who did things I’ve never even thought of doing, who’d faced ugly situations in their young lives I hoped I’d never face---would they let me minister to them, show compassion, love them? Or would I end up feeling as if I’d not done much good at all—four hours of meaningless ministry—because we were simply so different?

Sometimes living the Christian life in community is difficult and challenging and risky. We allow our differences to get in the way of love. The major purpose of Paul’s letter to the church at Galatia was to

deal with the fact that the Jewish people converted to Christianity and the non-Jewish people, the Gentiles, converted to Christianity could not get along. They saw only their differences. The Jews saw stubborn pagans who refused to follow Jewish laws and keep a kosher diet. The Gentiles saw stubborn Jewish Christians who insisted on rigid rituals down to the minute details. Seems to me they weren't all that different from each other—they both were stubborn.

Still, fellowship and ministry seemed impossible for people who simply could not see what bound them together. So Paul wrote to the church at Galatia. He wanted the Galatians to know that their new relationship with God was not dependent upon the culture from which they came or the religion they formerly practiced or the station in life they held. Those things only served to divide God's children.

Their new relationship with God, said Paul, came about through the loving, saving act of God's Son on the cross. They were now clothed with Christ, covered by his grace in their baptism into his death and resurrection. Being clothed in Christ, as Paul put it, meant they were clothed with a new identity—Christ's identity. They were all children of God and members of the body of Christ. This new identity overrode the old ways of labeling people. "There is no longer Jew or Greek . . . slave or free . . . male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Since by baptism there were no longer distinctions between members of the body of Christ, there was no reason for one part of the body to exclude another or ignore another or disdain another.

We need to hear Paul's words, too. We are prone to noticing differences, distancing ourselves from each other because of them. You and I need to hear how we are alike, how we are one in Christ, how all of us wear the same garment of forgiveness and new life through him. Whenever you and I recall our own baptism, and remember God's bringing us into his family, we should also remember the baptisms of those around us, how they were brought by God into his family, too. When we finally see our similarities as children of God, the differences become unimportant, and then our actions toward each other and toward all God's creation reflect the one who clothed us with his love.

As it turns out, I kept my four hours' work at Bethesda Home. There were moments when the vast differences in our lives seemed to create huge walls between the kids and me. But I also experienced moments, brief as they were, when the wall between us was breached.

One such moment I remember quite clearly. I was leading a chapel service with maybe 15 kids, and I took prayer requests from them. As was often the case, the youth, in their self-absorption, made prayer requests for themselves: "I have a home visit next week. Pray that it goes well." "My court hearing is coming up. Pray I get out soon." One young girl named Karen who was painfully shy gave me her prayer request prior to the service. She had just learned that her one-year-old cousin had died in a house fire. But before I could add that prayer request to the list, Yvonne spoke up. Yvonne was a big, rough, tough inner city girl, the kind you'd not wish to meet in a dark alley. She'd smart-mouth anyone, and it was difficult, if not impossible, for any of the chaplains to reach her.

Yes, Yvonne spoke up. She'd overheard about Karen's cousin. Yvonne asked us, not to pray for something in Yvonne's life, but to pray for Karen. In fact, that day, Yvonne had nine different prayer requests—for Karen, for staff members, and for other youth.

While I prayed, Karen began crying. After the prayers, I could see that Yvonne was crying as well, and holding Karen tightly. "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." Big, rough, tough Yvonne. Shy Karen. And a goody-two-shoes chaplain. God, through Christ, breached the walls and made us one. AMEN.

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