

One in Christ

Perhaps you have heard the phrase “There are two kinds of people in the world...” There are many endings to that phrase. Some are trivial: those who put ketchup on their French fries, and those who don’t; those who like pineapple on their pizza, and those who are normal. (I’m in the pineapple camp!) Some endings to the phrase are more serious, more poignant: those who accomplish, and those who don’t; those who need help, and those who need to help; those who succeed, and those who fail. I wonder how many ways we could finish the phrase; we are so good at dividing people into groups: progressives and conservatives, documented and undocumented, straight or gay, Republican or Democrat. We divide ourselves socially, culturally, economically, theologically.

There is an old joke that has been around for a long time. It goes like this: A man arrives at the gate of heaven and St. Peter asks, “Religion?” The man says “Methodist.” Peter looks at his list and says, “Go to room 24, but be very quiet as you pass room 8.” Another man arrives at the gate and Peter asks, “Religion?” The man answers, “Lutheran.” Peter says “Go to room 10, but be very quiet as you pass room 8.” A third man arrives. “Religion?” The man responds, “Presbyterian.” “Go to room 11, but be very quiet as you pass room 8.” The man replies, “I can understand there being different rooms for different denominations, but why must I be quiet when I go past room 8?” St. Peter replies, “Well, the Mennonites are in room 8, and they think they are the only ones here.” The interesting thing about this joke is that the names are interchangeable. If you look online, you might find the Baptists in room 8, or the Presbyterians, or the Lutherans. It is a joke that we all appear to tell on ourselves. But what do we really think about each other?

In our text today Paul is writing to the churches in Galatia. He has preached freedom in Christ, that Greeks, Gentiles, non-Jews...are welcome in God’s family. But the more conservative Jewish Christians have been saying, “Yes, you are welcome but you must first be circumcised and follow the law like we do.” Paul’s response is an emphatic “No!” “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.”

The metaphor Paul is using is that of a garment that one wears. The garment defines the person. When we see a man in firefighter clothing, we believe the man is a firefighter. It’s like a uniform one puts on...it tells us something about the person, about their identity. For Paul, putting on Christ means

one's primary identity is as a follower of Jesus...not as a Jew or Greek, not as a slave or free, not as male or female. It means following Jesus defines us. All of the other divisions are superseded by our loyalty to Jesus. We belong to Jesus and that very belonging changes everything.

In a different letter, his letter to the church at Philippi Paul wrote, "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." The passage goes on to speak of the Christ's humility and death on the cross.

If we were to read further in Galatians we would find Paul speaking about the freedom we have in Christ. Chapter 5 verse 13 declares, "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

For Paul, putting on the garment of Christ means we relate to each other with mutuality, not lording it over each other. To be slaves to one another means its not about me; its not even about "us" in our small group. It is about submitting to our brothers and sisters. It is about serving one another. It means we meet each other, even in our differences, with respect and care. It means we bear with each other when we have honest differences. It means we do not rush to judgement but take time to discern God's leading. And of course it means we share our joys and sorrows; we pray for each other and celebrate with each other.

Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35) For Jesus, and for Paul, our love for each other is the mark that identifies us as a disciple of Jesus. When we put on Christ we commit to each other, even to the point of being broken for each other.

Today is world communion Sunday. It is a day when Christians all over the world partake of the bread and wine (or juice) remembering that Jesus body was broken on our behalf. We may use different forms of bread. We may use wine or grape juice. We may not even have the same understanding of what the bread and wine mean...are they symbols or the actual flesh and blood? But the important thing is that we all are participating in the event. To share in the bread and cup is to participate in Jesus' offering of himself on behalf of others.

Some years ago when I was teaching the preschool Sunday school class one Sunday our lesson was the story of the last supper Jesus shared with his disciples. I looked at the lesson and wasn't sure how appropriate it was for the age of the children I was teaching; I decided to give it a chance anyway. I had two students that Sunday. We sat in a small circle on our Noah's Ark rug. As I told the story I tore a tortilla and shared the pieces with the children. We drank grape juice when we reached the sharing of the cup. I'm not sure if the children even remember that Sunday, but it was the most reverent communion I have ever experienced - because it was not a ritual but because we were participating in the story.

Christian Churches Together represents dozens of diverse denominations from "five large families—Roman Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Evangelicals/Pentecostals, and Historic Black Churches." MCUSA is one of the denominations. Ervin Stutzman, who was MCUSA executive director at the time, tells the following story from one of the first gatherings, in January 2013. "From the very first service, I noticed the signs of God's presence among us. After worshipping at St. Mary's Roman Catholic Cathedral, we walked to the Central Presbyterian Church for a reception. The worship service and the gathering places were assigned to celebrate a historic moment—the signing of a 'common agreement on mutual recognition of baptism' between the Roman Catholics and four Reformed communions. I felt like an onlooker, since their agreement doesn't encompass the churches who celebrate believer's baptism. Nevertheless my heart beat with theirs as they shared how God had been at work among them to bring about this remarkable moment. For them it was akin to the way Anabaptists felt in Stuttgart, Germany, when the Lutherans officially asked forgiveness for the persecution of Anabaptists. Only God can break down the walls that have blocked the way to Christian unity for nearly 500 years."

Putting on the garment of Christ does not mean that we all become alike. It doesn't mean we forget our cultural practices, though we must discern them in the light of what Jesus teaches us. It doesn't mean we reach complete theological agreement. It doesn't mean everyone has to become like me. It also doesn't mean we will always agree. Sometimes, like Jesus, we must be broken for each other. We must forgive.

Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest, professor, theologian and author, reminds us that the communion cup is the cup of forgiveness. She writes, "When Jesus holds up the cup and offers what is in it as the fluid of forgiveness, he is not talking to people with a short list of minor sins. He is talking to people who will turn him in, who will scatter to the four winds at the first sign of trouble, and who will

swear they never knew him. He is talking to people who should have been his best friends on earth who turn out not to have a loyal bone in their bodies, and he is forgiving them ahead of time, as surely as if he had said, 'I know who you are. I know you will not be innocent of the blood of this cup, but I will not let that come between us...Let my life become your life, through the blood of this covenant.'

When we share the bread and the cup, we remember that Jesus gave himself on our behalf, on behalf of each of us, of all us....and we recognize that he calls us to also give ourselves on behalf of each other. Our new hymnal, *Voices Together*, offers this introduction to communion. If you want to follow along it is number 936. This is what it says:

“At the table of Christ we eat this bread and drink this cup
To remember the life and death and resurrection of Jesus,
To be united with Christ and with one another as the church,
And to look toward a time when all will be one.
As we eat and drink with thanksgiving, Jesus Christ is present with us
And we are empowered by the Spirit to follow Jesus’ way of love
As the body of Christ, broken and blessed for the life of the world.

May it be so. Amen.