



Rev. Chris Taylor - 6-23-19

"No Distinctions"

Psalm 43 and Galatians 3:23-29

Our church is going to be sixty six years old this fall. That's pretty young as Presbyterian churches go, but over the course of those years we've actually been a part of three different denominations. At our founding, in 1953, we were part of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. That's when our first sanctuary, the current chapel, was built. In 1958 that denomination merged with another to form the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. Our Sanctuary was built in 1964, and so it is the seal of that denomination that stands at the center of the great window. That's the denomination into which I was ordained.

In 1984, however, yet another denomination was formed when ours merged with the southern Presbyterians to form the Presbyterian Church (USA). Our atrium was built nine years after that merger and so it is a different seal, our current one, that you see on the doors that lead from the atrium into the sanctuary.

As wonderful as those mergers were, they are really just the flip side of a dark tendency we Christians have shown down through the years – the tendency to split. If there hadn't been so many splits in the first place, we wouldn't have had to merge back together.

The first big split in our denomination came in 1838 over the issues raised by the revivals that were sweeping through our country at the time. In 1858 and again in 1861 two more splits followed over the issue of slavery. What had been one denomination had split into four different ones in just over twenty years. Sadly, the trend continued and has carried forward right up into the present.

In the nineteen seventies two new denominations were formed when churches left over the issue of women's ordination. More recently, yet another denomination has been formed and still more churches have left, this time over the issue of

homosexuality. But the Presbyterian church is hardly unique in this respect. We are really just a microcosm of the larger church. While there are some thirty different Presbyterian denominations in the United States today, there are some thirty or forty thousand Christian denominations worldwide.

Apparently, there is something about being different that Christians find very threatening. Christians have been killing each other and going to war over our differences for nearly two thousand years. You see it right from the very beginning – you see it in Acts and in Paul’s epistles: people attacking each other and undermining each other because they had a different idea of what it meant to be faithful.

We certainly see it today. We see it in our politics: “How can you be a Christian, and support that candidate?” We see it on social issues: “How can you be a real follower and take the position that you do on abortion or Medicare for all?”

In the church I served back in Cleveland, we had people who could remember the days when you had to sign a pledge that you would never touch alcohol or cigarettes if you were going to be an elder of the church. In their time it was simply inconceivable that you could profess Jesus and have a smoke.

But here’s the thing: If being a Christian means having all the right beliefs and all the right behaviors, then we are all in big trouble. We’re in trouble because there is not one of us who is perfect; not one who has a lock on truth or can point to faultless behavior. I can say that because I know that every one of us is human, and being human means being less than perfect. Calvin called it “total depravity” – not that we are totally depraved, but that our brokenness, our sin, touches virtually every area of who we are. Even our best understanding at any given moment, then, is going to be flawed.

Now this doesn’t mean we throw up our hands and stop trying. Part of the unique joy of this journey with Christ is growing deeper in our understanding. I’m not the same Christian I was thirty or forty years ago. It’s not that where I was then was so wrong or terrible. No, it is just that as I’ve grown older I’ve gained more experience, and spent more time in study, observation, conversation and prayer. I’m in a different place, and I’m grateful for it – my walk with Christ is richer and more wonderful than it has ever been before.

Does that mean that if I had died thirty or forty years ago I would have been less acceptable in God's sight? No! My faith then was every bit as real and sincere as it is now. My understanding has evolved, but that doesn't make me "better" in God's sight. I was every bit as much a child of God then as I am now. What has changed has been my experience of God and my understanding of what it means to follow Jesus.

So unpack that a little bit. If I am as much a child of God today as I was thirty or four years ago when I was in a different place, what does that tell us about the nature of salvation? It means that this relationship we have with God through Christ isn't about being perfect or even "better." It means that it's not dependent upon getting every belief just right or every work in perfect conformity to God's will.

What matters most to God isn't where we stand on some imaginary line – all the way to the right or to the left or somewhere in between. What matters most is that we are on the line at all. It is our faith in Christ and our faith alone that puts us there.

That person sitting a few chairs away who is an avid Republican or Democrat or Independent – they are just as much a Christian, just as much a child of God, as you or me. I was different thirty or forty years ago. They happen to be different now. But through Christ, God's loving arms are wrapped around us all.

That's what Paul is getting at in our text, "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" (Gal. 3:28). He is listing some of the primary distinctions of his time. He isn't saying those distinctions have disappeared. What he is saying, rather, is that in Christ, those differences are no longer the most important thing. In Christ we find something infinitely more important: a life-giving, life-changing relationship with God grounded not in being perfect, but grounded in faith and faith alone.

"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" (Gal. 3:25).

Here is where I think we Christians keep getting it wrong. We keep thinking the key to being faithful is uniformity. We keep thinking that everyone should be on the same page because "getting it right" is what matters most of all. And so we

judge each other: if you don't do baptisms the way I do; if you don't believe the same things I do about the way the three persons of the Trinity relate to each other within the godhead; if you drink alcohol (or don't drink it); if you disagree on slavery, or race, or the role of women, or homosexuality; if you don't worship the same way I do – any of these things, then I can't be in fellowship with you because you are just so clearly wrong. I can't risk being polluted by your "impurity."

Nonsense!

Paul never says that we are all supposed to be the same. In fact, Paul says just the opposite: our very differences are part of the way God created us, they are part of what makes us stronger as the Church. And if we are different people, then we are going to have different opinions, different understandings, and a different perspective that we bring to our walk with Jesus. Just read Romans 14 or I Corinthians 8.

The greatest witness we can offer to this broken world isn't in everybody being the same, or believing the same things, or acting in the same way. That's what the world leans towards. No, our witness lies in the love and respect we have for each other even in the midst of those things that would otherwise divide us.

That's counter-cultural. That's what speaks of Christ's presence in our midst. "Look at the way those Christians love each other!"

May God grant us the grace and power so to live.