

Last week we started a new sermon series that is intended to prepare us – as a community of faith – for living through another contentious presidential election season. This series will look at some of the letters that the Apostle Paul wrote to the churches he helped to start – and explore the ways he helped those churches live together in community in the midst of uncertain times.

Today, the letter we will read a portion of is Galatians. In Jesus’s time, Galatia was a small Roman province in what we now call Turkey. One of the primary reasons Paul writes to this church he helped start is because they were in conflict after another group of preachers stopped by and taught some things that were counter to what Paul had taught. Paul wrote a letter to the church to try to tamp down the false teaching, and to calm down the conflict in the community. What I am going to read in a minute is in some ways Paul’s main argument for how to handle the conflict.

I am reading from the third chapter, beginning in the 23<sup>rd</sup> verse. Before I read it, please join me in prayer:

*Open us by your Spirit, Lord, to hear these ancient words and to help realize that they speak to us still. We ask it in the name of the one who saves – then, now, and always. Amen.*

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Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith.

But 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.

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.

And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.

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I was 13 or 14 years old when I first remember knowing that there was a conflict in the church I belonged to as a child. It was a little awkward because my dad was the pastor.

I won’t get too specific, but when my family went on a vacation during the summer that year, dad had a guest preacher come on the Sunday he was away. Some of the members of the church were upset by who the guest preacher was and they raised a stink about it. I’m sure I don’t know all the details, but there were meetings and one-on-ones and letters written – I could tell it took a toll on my dad. I remember things at church felt a little...ick...for a couple of months.

It’s not fun when there is conflict in church.

One of my uncles is a pastor. You may or may not know that almost everyone in my family is a pastor – wife, mom, dad, sister, brother-in-law...it’s almost pathological. But this uncle is radically different. He is a **Methodist** pastor. He pastored churches in Delaware for a while – and was really good at it. The Bishop gave him a promotion, and for the last 15 years of his ministry my uncle served in a role in the Methodist church called the District Superintendent.

When I was ordained as a pastor and knew a little bit more about the church, I asked my uncle what – exactly – he did as a District Superintendent. What I learned is that the District Superintendent is the person local congregations call to help them when they find themselves in conflict. For 15 years, my uncle was the peacemaker for church fights. He saw a lot of different kinds. When he retired he spent a couple of months in New Mexico doing silent retreats in monasteries to help him recover his own sense of peace.

I think there are a number of reasons why conflict in the church is so difficult. Church is often a place of deep meaning and memory. Church is a place to celebrate milestones: weddings, baptisms. Church is a place that has provided comfort: at the death of a loved one, or by accompanying us through hardship or struggle. Church is a place that helps us navigate life

and the life of faith. To experience conflict in the same space where these things happen – and with the same **people** and **leaders** who help these things to happen...that can be disorienting and disillusioning and downright disappointing.

And, yet, since the church is made up of **people** – well...with people comes conflict. That’s just kind of the deal. The good news is that ever since there has been a church, there has been conflict. The bad news is, if it’s not managed well, those conflicts can damage the family of faith and distract from what God needs the church of Jesus Christ to be.

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The church that Paul started in Galatia was in conflict. For that church, the issue was whether people could be saved because of God’s grace through Jesus (this is what Paul taught) – or whether, in order to be saved, people had to behave a certain way by keeping Jewish law (this is what the other group of preachers taught while Paul was away starting different churches elsewhere).

That might not sound too controversial to us. It’s just a theological disagreement. But what helps is to know **why** that disagreement mattered to the Galatians...to understand the **emotion** behind the argument. Being a Christian...being a follower of Jesus...in the time that Paul started his churches, was a **choice** in a world where there were lots of other options when it came to what to believe and who to worship. It’s hard for us to get our head around – sitting here in a magnificent sanctuary and...many of us...Christians because it’s how we were raised.

But, these churches that Paul started were extraordinarily small. Christians were very much in the minority. So a disagreement in a fledgling community was a big deal...a conflict could lead to the community collapsing.

Essentially, the issue was how to approach difference. The church in Galatia was made up of different kinds of people...with different backgrounds and experiences.

For those who taught opposite of Paul, one of the main reasons to keep Jewish law was to **claim a shared identity** – one that you could notice...that you could, literally, see: by what you wore, and by what you ate, and by what you said, and by how you treated your body. If everyone who was a part of the church of Jesus Christ followed these laws, then it would help distinguish the church from the world around it. In this way of thinking, difference in the community was a threat. So the goal was to adopt practices that created a sameness that would iron out the difference.

Years later, there is a lot about who we are as a church that varies from the issues that faced Paul’s congregation in Galatia. But I think we, too, struggle with how to approach difference.

I think it is difficult for churches like ours to walk through election seasons because elections are often times when it highlights our difference. What if your Bible study leader has a different opinion on gun control than you do? What if the person who always sits near you in the pew has a Trump sticker on their car? What if...gasp...the preacher has a different opinion than you do about the wisdom of supply side economics?

What do we **do** with those differences? How can it be **possible** for people who stand up every Sunday and join our voices to say what we believe – how can it be possible that those **same people** have different opinions about the issues of the day? Does that mean that we don’t actually believe the same thing? How do we **talk** about those differences?

Well...it’s been my experience that we don’t. Not really. Difference – particularly when it comes to what we think about the issues of the day – difference is something that...I think...we perceive as a threat to the community. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but there aren’t a lot of good models out there for how to have a civil disagreement about political issues, so most of the time we avoid talking about our differences of opinion for the sake of keeping the peace.

But here’s the problem: we know there is difference. Even if we don’t talk about it and fight about it – we know there are some ways that we aren’t all the same. And if we don’t learn to talk about those differences directly, it tends to come out sideways.

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To be clear, I really don't like conflict. I avoid it like the plague. It makes my stomach hurt. Being willing to have and manage conflict is a perennial fixture on my “areas of improvement” part of my annual review. And I've learned – the hard way – that pretending that everything is fine when it's obvious that there are issues and areas of disagreement that need to be addressed – is not a winning strategy.

In my tenure as a pastor, the person I locked horns with the most was a man named John. (John is a member of a church I served in Richmond...not anyone here, for the record.)

John was recently retired as a judge – I was his 26-year-old Associate Pastor. I would describe myself as a moderate on a lot of issues – some would say I lean a little left. John was so far left he might as well have been called Trotsky.

John would never hesitate to challenge me on what I preached, prayed, said in meetings...to him, I was never progressive enough. He was frustrated that our church wasn't doing more to step out on social issues that he thought were a reflection of what Christ wanted the church to do. I would get letters, emails, phone calls, and earfuls over lunches and cups of coffee.

To be honest, John drove me absolutely nuts. And not just me! I think John drove a lot of people nuts!

But you know what John did? He showed up. I don't remember a funeral at that church that John didn't attend and serve as an usher. I don't remember a confirmation class when John wasn't someone's confirmation sponsor. I don't remember a Monday morning that John wasn't manning the door at our weekly soup kitchen ministry to the homeless. I don't remember a congregational meeting where John wasn't in attendance, looking eager enough to ask a question.

I knew that what mattered to John – even more than his completely ridiculous and annoying opinions that he freely shared with anyone who would listen – I knew that what mattered most to John was his commitment to the members of that church who were – by the love and grace of Christ – part of his family.

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The Apostle Paul doesn't get too specific about how to manage the inevitability of conflict in the church.

He knows there are differences in the congregation – and he names them: Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. If he were writing to us, I bet he could go on...Republican and Democrat, Boomer and Millennial, pro-choice and pro-life...

All of those differences are real – but they are relative when it comes to who we are because of God's grace.

Paul wants us to know that we have been clothed with Christ. And not because of our doing. That we are one in Christ. That we are heirs to the promise.

And in whatever other ways we are different – none of that matters as much as whose we ultimately are.