

It has been a difficult week for many people in our nation, after yet another mass shooting, watching the sorrow of those intimately connected, family and friends, and reading their comments; and then, reading the tweets and comments and *even the sermons* of those who found reason to gloat at the death of 49 persons that God loved. So I chose today's text from the lectionary, because I needed scripture to be my guide and not my feelings, so that I might ponder the moment and consider my words with a bit less anger: and that is one thing the lectionary is for.

On the news, you may have seen signs crudely printed with the sentiment, "We are Orlando." Maybe you remember other occasions the past couple of years when you saw the same signs carried by mourners at memorial services, the same words spoken by protesters and by people all over the world, "We are Charleston," "We are Newtown," and this one from a year and a half or two ago, "Bring back our girls," in support of the 200 young women abducted in Nigeria. It's not easy to keep seeing the horrific violence done with such narrow-minded and gleeful disdain for people. It seems never to let up. But here is one thing we do, we try to

suffer with them, try to take some of their hurt onto ourselves. Thus the sermon title, that we are all one, united in our grief and our outrage at the attempts of the violent and hateful to destroy those they choose to dislike. “All one” is this sense of our joining together as friends to share the pain of a persecuted people.

The Apostle Paul affirms this same theological ideal, that we as believers are all one by our faith in Jesus. It means that within this community of friends and “children of God,” there is no place for division and pride, can be no cause for the elevation of some over others: as he writes in verse 28, “there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female.” Christ’s church cannot permit advantage based on religious heritage or social standing, no disadvantage because of race or gender or sexuality, for we are all one in Christ. Jesus makes us one, and equal before God, and no human opinion can diminish our standing in God’s judgment of us, or God’s love for us; nothing can change the way God sees us- as his children. What a blessed assurance of God’s care that any and all of us are held in the same high regard by our Maker, respected and cherished.

It should be a blessing and a joy to the “lesser” individuals, these our passage has named Greeks, slaves, women- the ones who never had the benefits of religious upbringing or power and privilege, those oppressed in society and outside the sphere of influence, non-citizens, bound to servitude, and ruled over- that they might find a community of full acceptance. Except that the church must be certain it does indeed offer full acceptance. “You are all one in Christ Jesus.” And so, while a blessing to the pagan, the slave, the female, in our passage, it is also a command to the elite, to those who might presume the “accident” of their birth is proof of God’s extra-special grace for their lives; their position and self-worth they use to justify their unearned privilege: it is God’s command that these see the people beneath them as equals, and equally loved by God, because of Jesus Christ.

Paul teaches here, that within the community, built upon the crucifixion of Jesus and his resurrection, we must view one another as equals, and as persons who together share the promise of God; who have become heirs of Abraham- not just the Jew, as his descendant, but also the Gentile who believes; inheritors of God’s promise-and not just sons and

free men, but now by faith, slaves and women. By faith we understand ourselves possessing that same elevated status: children of Abraham and children of God. And by faith we must see all our brothers and sisters with that same understanding. That is, my faith means I must consider you as God's beloved; and your faith means you must think of me as one deserving of God's love; and everyone else. Only in this way can we be joined together in intimate and selfless fellowship. All One. Only by this may we enjoy unity.

Verse 27 provides a helpful phrase, "as you were baptized into Christ, you have put on Christ." To "put on" Christ, like you would put on new clothing, so that when your brothers and sisters look at you they see Jesus: you look like Jesus, that's what faith does. But also this: that you put on the mind and heart of Jesus, the attitude and compassion of Jesus, so that when you look at others, you see them with his eyes, with love and with his spirit of humility and caring. That's what faith does.

So Paul is writing to the faith communities in Galatia: this is how you get along, this is how you live as God's people, this is how you honor and obey the Lord, by this sense of inclusion and fellowship. But it can happen

only when we see with Jesus' eyes; it is ultimately and urgently important: our faith is meant to give us a new way of seeing other people, all other people, and understanding them with the mind of Jesus and with his love for others- a love that does not discriminate; there is neither male nor female, slave nor free, Jew nor Greek. If this is God's wish for the world, an unbiased and equal society, then we cannot limit this conception of individuals to the community of faith alone; rather we must consider every person as God's beloved, and thus, our equal, and deserving of life and joy. And so, we are never permitted to demean or hurt or slander or cheat or kill; and no arbitrary grouping based on income or place of origin or sexuality or religion or racial background. The word of grace is just this, that if God loves us, then God loves every other person too.

“God doesn't make junk.” Do we really believe that? I think Jesus believed it- the way he lived his life and the way he died seem to prove it. And it is a word that verifies God's pleasure in our lives, and God's delight in the lives of all who live humbly and without prejudice. This makes us all one, when we accept God's love for us, and when we give our love to one another.

We should read this passage as good news to the people of that time and place. And with a bit of updating, (Does the reference to “Jews nor Greeks” have particular relevance for a modern audience?) it is good news for us, as well. Paul’s understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ was that God had welcomed every one of them and made them full partners in the church’s life of fellowship and worship and service. Here Paul issues a word of grace to an oppressed minority: God’s complete acceptance of them, regardless of their station in life; and God’s promise that they are all one. So in our age, too, let us speak this word of God’s mercy to all the oppressed- out there as well as in here- who are persecuted and hated, or broken down and defeated by the greed and malice that rules this world. Our faith demands that we see them with the eyes of Jesus, who calls to every man and woman, to every free person, and to everyone bound by poverty and hunger, or cut down by bigotry and injustice, and gives them perfect love. That is our task, too, because it is God’s grace to us, to follow our Lord in the way loving.

But we may feel sometimes that it’s a lost cause. There are too many who should be loving, but who spend their days searching out ways to hate,

who use their pulpits and their radio programs to preach prejudice and violence. But when I despair, I call to mind those TV spots for the free hospital where the kids battle against cancer, "You keep on fighting," they say, "because you're not fighting alone." "Not alone," that word is good news for us, too, because we are joined by all those of good will, who are made one by the spirit of forgiveness and caring and acceptance, those who truly believe there is neither Jew nor pagan (neither American nor alien!), slave nor free, male nor female: but we are all one, who seek to serve one another and to create a world more just, and peaceable and hopeful.