**“A Whole New Paradigm”**

By Robert L. Hunter

John Knox Presbyterian Church

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Galatians 3:23-27.

I want to direct your attention once again to scripture we just read from the Apostle Paul’s letter to the believers in Galatia. “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female. You are all ONE IN CHRIST.”

Doesn’t that shock you – at least a LITTLE BIT? Even though we may be accustomed to hearing this message for most of our lives, I think this is a RADICALLY surprising assertion Paul is making – all the more so because he wrote this more that 1900 years ago – to a group of believers in what is now SOUTHERN TURKEY!

Ethnic identity was not only more prevalent in that region and in that time, but tribe, family, traditions and religious practices were the very essence of one’s identity (Just as they are in the Middle East – and yes, in Turkey today!)

I can only IMAGINE the shock these words must have brought to the first readers of this letter. I can almost HEAR the astonished questions of the men who were gathered to hear the letter read (for it WOULD have been an all-male gathering!):

“What?? Read that part again! I must have heard it wrong!

Oh, THIS is going to stir up a ruckus in these parts! Maybe we’d better keep this part of the letter under wraps!

It can ONLY cause trouble, and more division. And Paul’s ministry around here might just be FINISHED!”

And maybe it got even more pointed: “No more Jew or Greek? Hey! I’m PROUD of my Greek identity and heritage. It is – after all – the very EPITOME of civilization, producing the finest achievements of which humans are capable!”

Answered by another: “That’s what’s wrong with this community. You Greeks think you can follow and worship our Christ – OUR MESSIAH! – without going to the trouble of becoming CHILDREN OF GOD first! Unless you convert and keep the law, you cannot even pretend to be followers of Jesus, THE CHRIST!”

(And I can even imagine it going downhill from there…!)

In the immortal words of Desi Arnaz… Next time Paul comes around these parts HE’S GOT SOME ‘SPLAININ’ TO DO!

Yes, so radical is this piece of writing that it calls us to a WHOLE NEW PARADIGM: A completely new understanding of our own identity.

It poses AN INTRIGUING QUESTION for each of us – a question we may be asked in a variety of different contexts: “WHO ARE YOU?”

Think for just a minute about the ways we use descriptions of our ETHNIC IDENTITY or GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE - very often, as EXCUSES for bad behavior:

* “Well, ya know I’M IRISH… Often used to excuse a hot temper, OR excessive consumption of alcohol!
* “I come from GERMAN extraction… Usually an excuse for stubborn rigidity, or domination.
* “My family come from Scotland…” To excuse STINGINESS or sour attitudes.
* “We’re FRENCH”, which is, I guess, an excuse for a snobby sense of superiority to the Germans, the Irish and especially the Scots.!!

(Well, I think I’ll stop here, now that I’ve offended more than half of my audience!!)

Though it sounds like he is, Paul is NOT saying that those differences and identifying distinctions no longer exist! What he says to us today – just as he said to those Galatian Christians so long ago, is these identifying traits do NOT define WHO WE ARE! “Though you continue to be male and female, slave and free, Jew and Greek – and every other variety of ethnicity and culture – there is ONE CENTER THAT TAKES PRECEDENCE OVER ANY AND ALL OTHER DIFFERENCES: YOU ARE – EVERY ONE OF YOU – CHILDREN OF GOD!

Every other identity in which you pride yourself is not the source of your true identity: You are ALL ONE IN CHRIST!” Period.

SOUNDS pretty GOOD… BUT…How does that message play out in our everyday lives? Speaking only for myself… Not very easily!

My wife and I live in a condominium community made up of 77 residences. Just four weeks ago a long-time friend in that community, persuaded me to go on the Board of Managers of the Homeowners’ Association. (!) What I already knew is that HALF OF THE 75 OWNERS had signed a PETITION TO REMOVE THE BOARD OF MANAGERS. A whole lot of misinformation, and some extreme dislike of the style of the new President (who DARED to make some much needed changes in how the board operated) had become SO intense, that a handful of people, by spreading malicious gossip and half-truths had stirred up this petition against the whole board. What a moment of opportunity for me to jump in and make PEACE AND HARMONY among my neighbors!!

Well, as you can imagine, Peace and Harmony have yet to break out in our little community – in spite of some pretty proactive efforts on my part, along with three other board members.

A week or so ago, though, as I was leaving to attend a meeting to engage some of the antagonists in conversation, my wife – who knows my Scottish-Norwegian temperament better than she ought to – stopped me as I was going out the door. And she had the AUDACITY to say to me: “When you begin this meeting, remember who you are… You’re not just another hostile SOB, YOU ARE A MAN OF GOD!” (Without going into much further detail, I can only say it has not been easy attempting to behave as if I am – above all – a child of God!

In fact, one day this week I had what I HOPE is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, while I was out for a walk. One of my neighbors – whom I had never met before! – drive up to me in her car, put down her window, saying, “Reverend Hunter?” (Now, I NEVER identify myself as “Reverend” anybody!) So, I replied, “Yes?” and leaned over to hear what she had to share with me.

Then this woman I didn’t know from Adam said, “I just want you to know that YOU are the best reason EVER for someone to NOT go to Church!” I could see the intensity of hatred in her eyes as she said this. And as she hit the accelerator to speed away, all I could think to say was, “Oh! Thank you for your kindness.”

Since that incident, I’ve lived with this question, WHO AM I? – What is it that DEFINES ME in an especially intense way.

* If I am – First and Foremost – a Child of God. And *PERHAPS* neighbor of mine is also a Child of God (since it’s not mine to judge)… Am I able to subject myself to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, in whom my true identity is found? (I’ll have to get back to you on that one…)
* Will I smolder and look for opportunities to return the spiteful behavior of this woman? OH, the things that I could SAY to her! OH the things I could say ABOUT her! OH, the list of vengeful acts I’ve accumulated in just a few days!! - Who Am I? Who will I be?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a brilliant German Theologian and Pastor, coming into his prime as the Nazis rose to power in the 1930s. He stood against the domination of the Church in Germany and only by the influence of his father, who was a renowned professor at Berlin University was he able to avoid put in jail. As the war broke out – in the 1939 – Bonhoeffer reached out to friends in Great Britain and in America for some way to stem the tide of National Socialism in Germany. As the war progressed, he went undercover and participated in two plots to assassinate Hitler, hoping that the reorganization of Germany might take place without the horrific loss of life that it eventually entailed on both sides.

In 1943 Bohnoeffer was arrested, along with several other conspirators, and spent more than two years in the Gestapo prison. Then, during the final days of the war, as the allied forces closed in, Bohoeffer was executed by the Gestapo, just weeks before the liberation of that portion of southern Germany.

During his prison confinement, Bonhoeffer carried on a lively correspondence with his best friend, Eberhard Bethge, as well as his parents and his fiancée, Maria von Wiedemeyer. Among the many letters and papers from prison, there is this poem, entitled “WHO AM I?” that has lived in my heart and mind for the past 40 years, since I wrote my dissertation in graduate school on this great man.

WHO AM I?

Who Am I? They often say I step from my cell’s confinement calmly, cheerfully, firmly, like a squire from his country estate.

Who Am I? They often tell me I talk to my warders freely, and friendly and clearly, as though it were mine to command.

Who Am I? They also tell me I bear the days of misfortune equably, smilingly, proudly, like one accustomed to winning.

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?

Or am I only what I know of myself, restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage, struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat, yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds, thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness, tossing in expectation of great events, powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance, weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?

Who am I? Am I this or the other? Am I one person today and tomorrow another?

Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others, and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?

Or is something within me still like a beater army, fleeing in disorder from a victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.

Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, July 16, 1944.

Every day we are faced with this question as we live our lives together. Will we be driven by the antagonisms that are all around us, or will we be PULLED BY THE POWER OF GOD’S LOVE LIVE INTO A NEW IDENTITY CONFERRED BY OUR RISEN LORD?