

AS MANY OF YOU AS WERE BAPTIZED INTO CHRIST
HAVE CLOTHED YOURSELVES WITH CHRIST.²
⁸THERE 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.

GALATIANS 3

A radical truth we keep growing into:
You are all one in Christ.

Unity in Christ transcends every category Paul can think of:
Neither Jew nor Greek
Slave nor Free
Male nor Female

Ethnic/Religious, Social status, economic, sexual, gender

“There is no longer male and female”. In the early eighties, when I was heading towards ordination, the Anglican Church was ordaining women, but there was still controversy – I came from the Diocese of Calgary which didn’t ordain women, there were still people against it – this passage of scripture was immensely important to me, it was essential Good News – freeing and empowering and affirming. I interpreted it to mean equality between men and women, women were as capable as men, as important in the eyes of God, and this interpretation of Galatians was defiant in the face of much of the history of the church which had seen women as second class humans.

That interpretation is true, as far as it goes. Now, though, I wonder about the limits of my interpretation then. Paul uses the binary categories of his society, accepted in his time: Jew or Greek, Slave or Free, Male or Female. For some reason there is a human tendency to create binary categories, 2 things set in opposition or contrast, either/or. Dualisms.

And then having created dualisms, we seem to say one is better than the other. One is superior. We create dualistic hierarchies. We like neat categories; it is simple to slot people in, fit them into our system, but dualisms tend not to allow for nuance and differences.

For Paul “being in Christ” doesn’t do away with categories that were products of his culture (Jew/Greek, male/female, even slave or free) but being in Christ “makes these differences before God irrelevant”.ⁱ Such human distinctions do not matter in

the “newness in Christ” . Paul’s letter to the Galatians is an exuberant exploration of the freedom and grace experienced in Christ. The gospel of freedom. A vision of the new creation, where Christ breaks down all dividing walls.

In the history of the Church, it seems the human institution has trouble with the freedom of the Gospel:

“Neither slave nor free”, but Western Christianity wouldn’t abolish the system of slavery for 1800 years, and still today slavery is a rampant global problem.

“Neither male nor female” but within a generation of Jesus a scribe would sneak in a marginal note that women shouldn’t speak in church, and from then on the note was copied into the text as scripture.

“Neither Jew nor Greek” but the Church’s anti-Semitism would lead to the Holocaust.

Yet, the work of the Holy Spirit is to lead us more and more into the freedom of the Gospel. Christ died for the world, God so loves the world, and the New Creation in Christ is to break down dividing walls.

This is the sense I have of the work of the Holy Spirit as General Synod moves towards marrying same-sex couples.

I know that this was a painful issue in this congregation which suffered a split when the vote was taken in the diocese in 2002 for blessing same-sex couples. And still a couple of people who have spoken to me are against it, but yet have the grace from experience that the church does not need to divide over this; the unity in Christ is more important to them. I have not preached about this here before, but the horror of Orlando pushes us as a church to work hard not to perpetrate or perpetuate prejudices, judgements against gay and lesbian, bi-sexual, transgendered or queer people.

We must work to address our fear of differences, fear that creates rules, and categories that slot and diminish human beings.

Our binary gender categories do not speak truth about the complexity of human experience. Rather than slot into categories, we need to listen to people’s stories.

As I said in the “Anglicanism 101” course this past week, thank God the Anglican tradition is to honour intellect and scientific inquiry and human experience. It is not my job as your priest to tell you what you *should* think about an issue, but I do think one of the pieces I want us to ponder is *how* we think through this, is that our unity is in Christ, our identity is in Christ. It is Christ’s faithfulness that saves us. Christ’s love is infinitely wider and more inclusive than our human-made categories.

I am convinced that our new life in Christ is not about behaviour control but about freedom and grace. Of course we are called to live out our sexuality (and everything else) in ethically responsible ways, responsible to others, community, the good of the whole. But we are also to live into freedom and grace that breaks down walls and leads to fullness of life.

Let us join in today's conversation about sexuality in a non-judgemental way. This week, Jamie Shupe, in Oregon, became the first person to legally choose neither female or male as their sex, to choose to be a non-binary-gender designated citizen.

A few weeks ago my daughter Anne and I joined several church people, with the Salal and Cedar ministry, at a protest about weaning ourselves from our dependence on fossil fuels. I wore my collar, purposely visible as a Christian and as a church leader. A group of us started singing "We're gonna break free from fossil fuels, down by the ocean-side...." At first others stood away from us and just watched our singing, even a bit suspiciously, then one young person stepped over to join us in singing. "Brave", I thought, and then others joined in. Later, after the singing finished, this same young person approached me and said "You used to be my Girl Guide Leader". I was startled, because it was not a young *woman* in front of me! The person went on to say "you knew me as Alexis, but I am now Alex. I am transitioning to my male self." I think it took huge courage to tell me this. Yes, I felt a dislocated, but the priest in me kicked in and responded: "May God bless your journey. May it bring you the fullness of life God wishes for you". Which opened conversation...

(I have had many recent encounters with people under the "Trans umbrella" – people who are not now the gender which was assigned to them at birth)

A week later I went to the Young Sojourners, youth event at Sorrento. A young person from another parish, whom I have known since she was a young girl, asked that we not use feminine pronouns any longer, identifying as "they". I know them first and most importantly as *baptized*. "They" belong to Christ. And unity in Christ transcends all other categories of identity. A different gender identity is not a sin. We all live on a spectrum that reflects the complexity and diversity of creation. We are all created in the image of God ⁱⁱ.

Where do we go with this? At baptism we promise "to respect the dignity of every human being". And respect means we need to honour each person's own self-identity, not impose identity categories. We need to create a safe environment for discussion. We need to hold space for each other, not freezing people in time, to one identity. ⁱⁱⁱ

The love of Christ transcends human categories and continues to push us beyond:
Beyond divisions
of old and young.
able and disabled.

Sexism.

Racism.

The healing of these divisions is life-long work.

All of us need to grow and change, clothed with Christ. Each of us needs to answer the question “what is my next step in healing divisions?”

“Where is Christ calling me to be more open?”

“Where do I need to grow and deepen my sense that we are all one in Christ?”

ⁱ Galatians: Interpretation Commentary. Charles Cousar.

ⁱⁱ As someone noted to me after church, the image of God is not binary!

ⁱⁱⁱ For these ideas, I am grateful for several conversations with my colleague Pastor Carolina Glauster.