

## **“ONE IN CHRIST: GRATEFUL TOGETHER”**

Ephesians 1:3-14; Galatians 3:23-29

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Thanksgiving... I really need this holiday and maybe you do too. Not because there'll be a large gathering of friends and family. There won't... just four instead of the usual 12-15. Not because there'll be massive quantities of food. The turkey will be smaller. We won't have to bring the roaster to make sure we get the largest turkey possible. Some of the extra side dishes will be missing. The traditional sharing of thanks will likely be shorter. The day will certainly be different. But in a year when so many have experienced hardship and loss, the pause is welcome, even necessary, to rediscover gratitude.

Today's scriptures are overflowing with things to be grateful for. Both texts focus on what God has done for us through Christ. Both use the imagery of inheritance. Ephesians tells us that we have obtained an inheritance "in Christ," and describes it as redemption as God's own people, and forgiveness of our trespasses according to the riches of his grace. These gifts are guaranteed by the presence of the Holy Spirit. In short we are adopted into God's family and everything that is God's will be passed down to us, or perhaps it would be better to say "through us."

This becomes clearer in Galatians where Paul writes, "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise." God promised to make of Abraham's and Sarah's descendants a great nation. This nation would be great because the world would be blessed through it. To belong to Christ is to be like Christ. To be like Christ is to be God's gift to the world. He healed the sick, comforted those who mourned, forgave sinners, fed the hungry, made the blind to see, the lame to walk, and the deaf to hear. We may not do these things with a word of command, but this is our inheritance... to bless the world. The world needs a little blessing. We get to do that. In the words of Jesus, we get to be salt to the earth and light to the world. It would be easy to become arrogant about this, but gratitude short circuits pride by recognizing that what we have to offer comes to us as a gift.

So what is it that Jesus brings to the church that the church brings to the world? Right before Paul's claim that we are now Abraham's (and Sarah's) offspring, he writes: "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." Most scholars see this as a brief creedal statement often used in baptism. Some see it as Paul's most radical statement undermining some of the pillars that structure society. Jews fought a decades-long struggle against the followers of Jesus over the acceptance of Gentiles within the faith community. Eventually the synagogue threw the Jewish-Christians out. The institution of slavery was well-established and vital to the Roman economy. The roles for men and women were well-defined and definitely separate.

Most people think that Paul was advocating for equality within the community of faith and not for a social revolution. The extension of the gospel to the Greeks is told in the book of Acts. Paul encourages Philemon to receive his slave Onesimus back as a brother.

Women were welcome as disciples of Jesus and played a major role in his ministry and in the early leadership of the church. Though short-lived, the hierarchies and inequities between these classes of people, were realized within the faith community at least on a limited basis. No attempts were made to extend these benefits beyond the church and in fact by the second century, Christians were fully separated from Jews, and the leadership of women within the church had been suppressed. If Paul intended this to radically change the world, he didn't get very far with it.

And yet... it's possible, likely even, that they do describe the blessed community of faith and express a call for transformation to the church today. Consider that Jesus was a first century Jew, that what we know about him (what he said and what he did) we learned mostly from first century Christians. Paul was a first century Jewish follower of Jesus. His concern was to build up the church, not advocate for a social revolution. But we are twenty-first century Christians. Some Christians today believe that this doesn't make any difference, that God and the gospel are the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. If you see any of these... run! The gospel is adaptive. Its expression changes with the context.

The conversation around these three polarities has changed considerably over the two millennia of Christianity. For the most part, we are no longer concerned to turn Jews into Christians, but we do still debate what it means to be a faithful Christian. Considerable animosity exists between what are regarded as just different sects of the faith. Catholics and protestants have turned down the heat as they engaged in ecumenical conversation, but there are many others who take a separatist approach, condemning the mainline churches as heretical and unsaved.

Complicating this question is the reality that Christians are no longer a minority and many of them have confused cultural norms with the practice of faith. "No longer Jew or Greek" was originally about overcoming the barriers that prevented Gentiles from joining the community of faith as equal participants. Today the barriers consists in a string of doctrinal, political, ecclesiastical and cultural disputes. The gospel for one faith community isn't even recognizable for another.

Slavery, as an institution, is no longer acceptable in our society, but the inequities created by that institution in the first century have not disappeared. Following our civil war and the emancipation of slaves in this country, the dominant caste worked hard to insure that the former slaves were "kept in their place. At they used threats, violence, even lynching to maintain the status quo, Jim Crow replaced some of the violence, and after the successes of the Civil Rights movement, mass incarceration became the preferred tool to maintain the racial hierarchy.

It hardly even seems necessary to mention that "no longer male and female" raises a host of issues not even thought about in the first century. Some churches have fought the struggle to remove barriers around gender identity and sexual orientation, while others have only hardened stances that marginalize these individuals.

When Paul cited these distinctions that supported inequities in his world, he urged the church to be different. I don't think he imagined the transformation of society, but he did hope that the church would not use them to make distinctions among one another. The

Gentile was entitled to the same respect and status as the learned Jew. Slaves and women should share in the same benefits and responsibilities and masters and men. Living this vision out proved to be difficult and has remained so to the present day. But doing so, or trying to do so, flows directly from following Jesus, from being one in Christ.

Every year we are brought back to this vision when we celebrate Christ the king. It seems strange to link this vision for breaking down the hierarchies to a day in which we honor Jesus as our Lord. But it's so critical that we hold these two things together because it tells us that Jesus is a different sort of king. He doesn't tax the people to secure the throne. He doesn't surround himself with knights and castles. There are no dukedoms. There are only humans who are loved and called to love. In Jesus kingdom there are "no longer Jews and Greeks, no longer slaves or free, no longer male and female."

As I think about this vision, I am mindful of and thankful for the many who have tried to live it out. I am thankful for Martin Luther, he brought to light the priesthood of all believers. I am thankful for Teresa of Avila who emphasized that we are all the body of Christ, his hands and his feet. I am thankful for Walter Rauschenbusch and Dorothee Solle who taught us to care for the poor; for Ida B. Wells and Martin Luther King Jr who taught us to treat all people with the same respect and that the community could not be whole unless all were free.

As we gather around tables in smaller groups, thinking about those who are not present this year, let us also remember to give thanks for those who have not be included at the table. Janet found for me this wonderful prayer which holds together Christ the King with Paul's vision for a more equitable world.

Create a throne room for yourself here, O Christ, but let it be the empty seat beside the anxious the lonely chair next to the confused, the vacant pew next to the hungry and reign, O Jesus, as sovereign over the forgotten.

May your reign be a mockery to the world but good news to those who seek out truth and may we join them in the search, finding you walking the streets or breaking bread or sitting by bedsides.

May we find you in border areas on the edge of things crossing over with the foreigner.

May we find you among children, learning to finger paint, as teachers to those who long to enjoy life again.

May we find you with the worried, silenced with nothing to say and space enough to keep it.

May we find you on the wrong side of the tracks, going where you should not and finding a place to lay your head among the lost.

May we find you singing our songs of justice and peace and removing your crown to do so.

May we find you with a word that lives in the hopes of the afraid and a comforting peace for those who are broken.

May we find you laughing at the powerful, unnerving what folk think so secure while welcoming those who have nothing into your throne room.

O Jesus, reigning in the world with your upside down kingdom may we find the faith to stand with you, sovereign of life, and servant of all.

Amen.

(Prayer written by Roddy Hamilton; posted at <http://www.nkchurch.org.uk/index.php/mucky-paws>).