

## ***“Can’t We All Just ~~Get Along~~ Belong?”***

*Galatians 1:13-17; 2:11-21*

New Revised Standard Version

In April 1992, riots broke out in Los Angeles in response to the acquittal of the LAPD officers who had brutally beaten Rodney King a year earlier. The beating of a black man by officers was not new, but the whole thing had been caught on video and the public seeing the footage *was* new. On the third day of the riots – as buildings burned and people were dying in the violence that had erupted in the streets after the verdict, Rodney King himself came forward and made a public plea for the riots to stop, forever coining the phrase in our cultural lexicon: “*can we all get along?*”<sup>1</sup>

In a moment of deep civil unrest, Rodney King’s statement was quite as personal as he himself a victim of violence of was seeing others be victimized and killed in the riots, but the urgency of his plea in that moment is lost when we reduce his words to a pithy quote that we throw out

whenever we have a theoretical disagreement about something at our church or at a PTA meeting or even around our own dinner tables at the holidays when someone says something uncomfortable or voices a dissenting view and sighs, saying: “*Can’t we all just get along?*” Which, if we’re honest, usually means, “*Can’t other people just agree with me or think like me or act like me?*”

The truth is – as protests against injustice prove time and time again – we cannot all just “get along” – until we all trust and know that we *belong*. And belonging is not theoretical. It is felt...deeply...in the bones and in the gut. A sense of belonging doesn’t come through words in the constitution, it has to be the lived experience of ALL people in this country. Nor can belonging come through a set of bylaws about membership, or even through inclusion

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<sup>1</sup> Rodney King quote from Wikipedia, accessed on May 8, 2021 at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rodney\\_King](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rodney_King).

statement about who is welcome; those written words mean little if the people for whom they affect do not know those words exist or if they do not reflect the lived reality in the church.

And so, it is to the age old questions of “how we get along?” and “what it means to belong” that we turn today.

As we wind up this second year in the Narrative Lectionary, we’re spending the next few weeks in Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Now Galatians is NOT the friendly pastoral letter you’d find in your Friday Enews; it’s not comforting or encouraging like 1 Thessalonians and it’s not like Philippians, which is just like one giant thank you note. No, in Galatians, we get from Paul what probably should have been the first draft of an email that he perhaps should have slept on and revisited before sending, but he hit send while his emotions were still running high because one thing rings loud and clear in Galatians – Paul is edgy and angry with the

churches in Galatia. And Paul’s impatience and anger seems to be rooted in weary frustration over a matter that just keeps coming up and never seems to be resolved in the early church: how do we know who belongs to Christ and who doesn’t? What’s on the checklist for the criteria of being a follower of Christ?

This desire for rules and a bit of guidance is completely understandable. As Christianity grew and was diversifying and expanding, all the sudden this movement that started with a Jewish leader and Jewish disciples got doused with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost – which Jesus had said would happen. So it’s not that the spread of the gospel was unexpected, it’s just that it was new, and it was happening fast, and as Alice said so well in her sermon last week on Acts 15 – Jesus didn’t leave a handbook on how to form a church or make decisions as a church body. He did, however, draw on his own Jewish tradition and give us the greatest commandment – *Love God and*

*Love Others.* But I guess that wasn't quite enough guidance for folks whose whole life in community had been defined by very specific rites and rituals like circumcision and keeping kosher. For the Jewish people, these were not human constructs, these were (and still are) divinely given laws that go back to their ancestors and many of the Jews felt like they were so important and critical to their identity as people of God that Gentiles, or non-Jews, should keep them as well in order to be counted as true followers of Christ.

A common misconception of Christians about Jews is that "keeping the law" is a way of "earning" God's grace or approval through "works," but that's not what covenant means. Keeping the law is the response of the Jewish people to receiving God's grace, to being God's chosen people. It's not a matter of proving, it's a matter of faithfulness and devotion, of community and commitment. So for a people for whom covenant had been so important – through exodus and

exile, destruction and rebuilding, oppression and liberation – it's no wonder that they held tightly and dearly to the rites and rituals that revealed that covenantal relationship to God to the world – like circumcision and keeping kosher. Perhaps it looks to an outsider like they were saying this is how to know who belongs with us – if you're circumcised and if you eat the right foods in the right ways. But really these rites and rituals revealed the depth of their understanding about their belonging to God.

Why does all this matter for the Galatians? Well, Galatia is Gentile territory (modern day Turkey), yet the people in Galatia, the Gentiles, were now being told that they needed to be circumcised and eat kosher to be part of the church community. And this is so frustrating to Paul because Paul thought this whole issues of whether the Gentiles had to follow Jewish rules was all was settled back in Acts 15 – when the Council at Jerusalem was held to discuss this very matter.

All these testimonies were heard about the Jewish apostles interacting with Gentile believers and how they saw God's Spirit at work in the Gentiles.

And so at this Council in Jerusalem in Acts 15 it was decided that Gentiles did NOT need to be circumcised to be recognized as members of the community of faith. The verdict was in. The decision had been made. Done and done. Let's move on, right?!

Well, as admirable as the Acts 15 discernment process was, when has a decision in the church ever been implemented easily, smoothly, or without dissent or conflict? Rarely, right? Making a decision is one thing; living into it is a whole other thing.

And it seems that there were still some leaders in the early Jewish Christian movement who were NOT satisfied with this decision. They were dissenters. And they did not agree to disagree, but they flat out disagreed and decided to go

out and about in the Mediterranean world teaching their belief – that Gentiles DID need to conform to Jewish law to be Christians.

And go figure, the people in the Galatian churches were confused! I mean, Paul told them one thing. These other people were telling them something different. And, of course, they just believed the latest thing they heard by whoever had authority and told it to them.

And honestly, it's hard to be critical of these teachers who were saying, "*No, if you are really to be a person of God you DO need to be circumcised and eat kosher*" because this is what they had been taught their whole life and what we can assume Jesus also practiced as a Jew. They were trying to be faithful to what they had always known. We can all empathize with that, I think. If you have values or traditions you hold dear, and I told you that you need to give up those values and traditions to be a part of Calvary – then you'd

probably take issue with it and throw me out – or at least send me an email or two! But remember – giving up one's beloved tradition was NOT what Paul was asking of the Jewish Christians. Paul and the Council in Jerusalem never said that Jews had to stop these rites and traditions, what they said was is that Gentiles did not have to do those things to belong to the community. In other words, it was not about getting rid of tradition, but about making space for others at the table who do not share your tradition.

And truth be told – this is hard to do. Especially in the church. We say “all are welcome” but then when someone walks into our small group, we talk about our kids and grandkids and fellow friends at the church without ever explaining who these names or people are to new folks. Or a guest walks into worship and we say all are welcome and we use big words like Invocation or Benediction or Doxology – without explaining them. Which I'm sure feels like sitting in a

doctor's office and hearing a diagnosis and treatment plan when you don't understand half of the words the doctor is saying. The doctor is not trying to be confusing; they are speaking the language of their profession. But we all know the gift of doctors who can translate their medical language into words/concepts we can understand. Sure, we go back and learn the real medical words of our diagnosis later, and yes, people can come to know what Invocation and Doxology mean – but we must be aware and conscious of the fact that we are always inviting people into a living tradition that newcomers may know very little about at first. And essentially, this is what the early church was dealing with – on a massive scale: how to welcome new people into a community that had centuries of lived, shared experience and history and language and customs together.

The key question being: do we let people belong – as they are, with their own identity and tradition (realizing that they

may influence us or grow to be greater in number than us or they may even change us – OR – do we ask them to conform and make them behave and believe as we do in order for them to belong?<sup>2</sup> And by “make them” I don’t mean having them sign a contract or something, but rather are there enough subtle or not-so-subtle social cues given in our church that say, “*this is accepted and this isn’t*”?

Often these come through what we prescribe as doctrine or “right belief” in the church. Galatians 2:16 often gets touted as a verse to prove the argument of “faith over works” because Paul writes, “*We have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified (be in right relationship with God) by **faith in Christ**, and not be doing the works of the law.*” But in the Greek, “**Pistis Christou**” – is actually ambiguous in its grammatical meaning. It can mean faith IN Christ or it can mean the Faith OF Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Hinkle Shore, “Commentary on Galatians 1:13-17; 2:11-21,” *Working Preacher* (21 May 2017), accessed on May 9, 2021 at

Theologians continue to debate whether that means we have to believe in Jesus and it’s our FAITH that “justifies” us (or symbolizes that we belong to God or are in right relationship with God) or whether it’s the faith OF Christ, meaning the faith Jesus has on behalf of us all – regardless of what we believe – that justifies us “or makes us right with God?” Is it us saying, “Jesus is Lord” that matters OR is it simply the fact that “Jesus IS Lord” (whether we say it or not) that matters?

We don’t know what Paul originally meant. But really – does it matter? Because Paul probably didn’t fully understand such a deep theological truth either. In fact, the ambiguity of it – leaves us with more of a both/and scenario, than an either/or scenario. Perhaps our belonging to God, our being in right relationship with God, is about both our belief in Christ and about God’s grace through Christ. Maybe they are one in

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/living-by-faith/commentary-on-galatians-113-17-211-21>.

the same, or one informs another in a way that is not so easily distinguishable. In any case, I think the ambiguity furthers Paul's point that belonging to Christ, rather than believing the right thing or behaving the right way, is perhaps what matters most to God. And it's why he's frustrated that people came into the Galatian churches and led them to think that they had to conform to Jewish law in order to be full fledged member of the church INSTEAD OF the Jewish Christians asking the question, "What is going to help *the most* people belong?"

We as the church, 2,000 years ago and still today, spend a lot of energy on how to "get along" with one another and how to help people fit in to our church or ways of doing things. And I think this is because we want to come to church and feel comfortable and in an ever-diverse and expanding world. Perhaps we come to church to be in the company of like minded people, but really the church, and following Jesus, has never been about agreeing

with one another or all thinking the same way or behaving the same way. Following Jesus is about understanding our belonging. But not "belonging" to one another like a country club or a political party or a sports team, belonging to God as the one who birthed us into being. Nurturing figures in our lives – sometimes our mothers and sometimes mentors or coaches or friends –help us feel like we belong, don't they? They help us come into our own identity and not feel awkward about who we are. They accept us. Our quirks are seen as gifts and not defects. And that nurturing, welcoming feeling is what Jesus came to earth to show us and teach us – what it looks like to *belong to God* as a child of God and then what it looks like to act out of that belonging to love others so that *they* feel that belonging too!

In an interview about her book, *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*, social scientist and researcher, Brené Brown said, "*We are*

*more sorted than we have ever been in the history of the U.S. We have built ideological bunkers. We are more likely now to live with, worship with, and go to school with people who are politically and ideologically likeminded,"*

While logic may suggest that this "sorting" results in more people feeling a sense of belonging, Brown warns these connections are "counterfeit." *"It's not real connection. All it is – I call it 'common enemy intimacy,' is that the only thing we have in common is we hate the same people."*<sup>3</sup> It turns out that our greatest barrier to belonging is just trying to "get along" with others or just trying to "fit in" because when we *"fit in"* as opposed to *"belong,"* we acclimate to the situation instead of standing for our authentic self.<sup>4</sup>

In her books she writes, *"True belonging is the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most*

*authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness. True belonging doesn't require you to change who you are; it requires you to be [fully] who you are."*<sup>5</sup>

I think this this is what the Apostle Paul is getting at in this letter to the Galatians, but he's using different language, of course. The Galatians were spending a lot of energy in their early formation of the church trying to decide how everyone could "fit in" or another way to put it is – "to get along" – in terms of their external rules and laws and customs. But really, he wanted them to see that with God's grace – belonging is already a given with Christ – there is nothing we can do to earn God's love or lose God's love. We might have our own rituals and rites that help us mark and express God's love but these are not things we can impose on others. The best way we can honor Christ and the *imago dei* – the image of God –

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<sup>3</sup> CBS News, "Author Brené Brown on the difference between belonging and fitting in," (12 Sept. 2017), accessed on May 9, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Brown, *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Brown, *ibid.*



in us is by being our full,  
authentic selves.

You see, while Paul's weary frustration with the churches in Galatia is due to the fact that they aren't following the decision of the Council in Acts 15, his deeper anger, and perhaps sadness, in the letter to the Galatians is that the people do not see how this forced adherence to the Jewish law is not only not welcoming to Gentiles, but it is also not true to the freedom of the gospel in Christ for all of us to live and move and have our being as the Spirit moves within us.

As Paul will write in his letter to the Romans, "*nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus*" (Romans 8:38-39) – and this includes rites and rituals like circumcision and keeping kosher. Or in our modern day church, we might say "*nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus*" – not what we wear to church – suits and ties or jeans and sneakers, not what Advent/Christmas traditions we have, not whether

we worship online or in the sanctuary, not what sexual orientation or gender identity we are, not what language we speak or how much (or how little) we curse, not whether we like traditional hymns or contemporary music, not whether we believe in the literal interpretation or scripture or a more metaphorical one, not whether we've been baptized – as an infant, as a child, as an adult or never at all, not whether we give a lot of money to the church, or no money to the church – nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Nothing means nothing.

And this is Paul's point. To the church back in Galatia – Gentiles do not need to adopt the Jewish law in order to be adopted by God – they are already God's children in Christ. AND to the church today – whatever laws or rules or regulations or traditions we have that we think define who we are as Christ's church or who we are as Calvary even – those things might be fine and good for us, but if they hinder

us from welcoming others who bring their full selves and own tradition and gifts to the table – then we need to check ourselves. Because the life of Christ requires parts of ourselves to die in order for Christ to live anew in and through us as an expanding and diverse body, not as a monolithic unit. Maybe these things don't need to die in us as individuals (although they might), but what Paul is perhaps suggesting is that something needs to die in us communally, or collectively, because remember he is writing this letter not to ONE person, but to whole community. And community requires "give and take" and sacrifice...and yes, a little death now and again to make room for new growth.

Just as belonging in Christ is much bigger than the leaders who were teaching that belonging is about circumcision and keeping kosher in Galatia were able to imagine, I have a feeling a sense of true belonging in Christ is even bigger than what WE, as

Calvary Baptist Church of Denver, are imagining today.

God created us all with different beliefs and behaviors and ways of being. But if we ever want to model a community in the way of Christ, in the way of Grace, perhaps when we feel disagreement or tension or a desire to have others conform to our ways, whenever we feel the itch to sigh and say, "*can't we all just get along?*" – perhaps we can use THAT as a signal to ask a deeper question of ourselves – "*are we creating space for all to belong?*"

Because in the end, Jesus never focused on everyone "getting along," he opened his arms and made space for everyone to "belong." Now, we, as the church, as the Body of Christ today, can we extend our arms to have the same reach as Christ? Because ironically perhaps, the more we help people truly belong, the more likely we probably all are to actually get along. Go figure.

Amen.