

“Children of God”
June 19, 2016
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Psalm 42 and Galatians 3:23-29



Psalm 42 CEB:

Just like a deer that craves streams of water, my whole being craves you, God. My whole being thirsts for God, for the living God. When will I come and see God's face? My tears have been my food both day and night, as people constantly questioned me, "Where's your God now?"

But I remember these things as I bare my soul: how I made my way to the mighty one's abode, to God's own house, with joyous shouts and thanksgiving songs— a huge crowd celebrating the festival! Why, I ask myself, are you so depressed? Why are you so upset inside? Hope in God! Because I will again give him thanks, my saving presence and my God.

My whole being is depressed. That's why I remember you from the land of Jordan and Hermon, from Mount Mizar. Deep called to deep at the noise of your waterfalls; all your massive waves surged over me. By day the Lord commands his faithful love; by night his song is with me—a prayer to the God of my life.

I will say to God, my solid rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why do I have to walk around, sad, oppressed by enemies?" With my bones crushed, my foes make fun of me, constantly questioning me: "Where's your God now?" Why, I ask myself, are you so depressed? Why are you so upset inside? Hope in God! Because I will again give him thanks, my saving presence and my God.

Because this is the first Sunday (at least in quite a while) that we are reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians, there are a couple of things you should know about this passage before I begin reading. For a relatively short letter, there is a lot of intensity here. Paul founded the churches in Galatia, and most of the church goers before their conversion were originally pagans, or Gentiles—or as he refers to them in this passage: the Greeks.

After Paul's departure from Galatia, some unidentified Jewish-Christians challenged the churches in Galatia- saying that if they really want to be believers, they need to follow more parts of the Jewish law as prescribed in the Hebrew Scriptures: mainly circumcision, but also food laws and Sabbath and other festivals.

Whether the gentiles needed to be circumcised was the *number one* issue to the early church... above everything else- this is what they were worried about. It appears in the scriptures over and over again above all the other issues- It was very controversial.

This letter, written sometime in the mid 50s, is Paul's response to the challenge that the Galatian men needed to be circumcised in order to be true believers. So we are all on the

same page from the very beginning, Paul does NOT think that the Galatians need to be following the Jewish law in order to believe in Jesus Christ and be part of the church, this letter is to dissuade them from following those rules—the Law.

Really, Paul is worried that people will get too caught up in following the law and forget about the grace given by Jesus—he wants to remind the Galatians that it is not *what we do* that saves us, but the *grace freely given*. It was most likely this letter that inspired Paul to further expand on this theology in his letter to the Romans—Paul’s magnum opus if you will.

One final note before we begin reading the scripture: In my preparation for this sermon, by far, my favorite quote about this scripture came from a scholar named Beverly Roberts Gaventa. She writes “Paul manages to offend virtually everyone in this passage.” So with that- let’s listen for the word of God amidst the writings of Paul.

Galatians 3:23-29 (CEB)

Before faith came, we were guarded under the Law, locked up until faith that was coming would be revealed, so that the Law became our custodian until Christ, so that we might be made righteous by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian. You are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Now if you belong to Christ, then indeed you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to the promise.

This is the word of God.

Last Sunday, I did my regular news check-in before worship. To be fair, I do a news check-in every morning- it’s neurotic for sure- and most mornings, the world has not fallen apart. But last Sunday, I caught the breaking news story of what was happening in Orlando. When we started worship at 10:30, news sites were reporting that 20 people had died. By the time the picnic wrapped up, the number had jumped to 50, with 50 more injured.

I’m sure most of you have seen or read or heard something about this horrific shooting during the week, and I trust that you have been praying for the victims, their families, the communities involved, and the shooter himself: Omar Mateen.

In the past week, we, the public, have been given a great deal of information about Omar. Omar has been labeled as a man ‘who wished to die’, a troubled man for years now, a radical Islamist- to use a hot button label—he has been accused of abusing his wife, as being a loner, he was a troubled child disciplined repeatedly in elementary school because of his aggressive and rude behavior, and suspended from high school for almost 50 days because of fighting... the news tells us he was ‘macho’ and angry... and that he was on watch lists and had been investigated as a possible threat by different authorities. All of this seems to be true.

But at some point during the week, I learned something else about Omar. Omar was born in 1986. It caught me off guard. I did a little research, and found out that Omar and I are less than two months apart in age- I'm just a tad older than he. For some reason this little tidbit stuck in my head, and I couldn't let it go. I started to make a list, like an actual written out list, of all the things Omar and I have in common.

- We are almost the exact same age
- we were both born in the eastern half of the United States to parents who are still married
- We both moved homes when we were young
- We both sought more education after high school.
- We have both traveled internationally on major university sponsored trips.
- Omar and I are both registered voters in the Democratic Party,
- and we both married our respective spouses within a year of each other.
- While Omar did divorce and remarry- we both have one child.
- We both attended our place of worship regularly, with our family, and just as Omar's Imam (or Muslim religious leader like a pastor) said about him, I'm sure Beth would say about me: that we prayed, and showed no signs of violence.
- We are both part of a major world religion that preaches peace and love, and that also has smaller fractions that don't preach as much peace and love.

Omar and I have a lot in common, but also it seems like we couldn't be further apart. I found myself asking "What happened to this man? Why did we end up on such different paths? If Omar and I had gone to school together—would I have labeled him as violent? Or what if we were in the same group of friends? If Omar was my neighbor growing up, would my parents have invited his family to dinner? Why was he so angry?"

There are certainly things from his background that I could list that might speculate answers to some of these questions... but we can't really answer them completely with certainty. I will never know what it was about his childhood or his adult life FOR SURE that led us on such different paths.

And that realization led me to a new set of questions... "What happened to me? Why am I not a loner? Why did I try not to be macho or rude or aggressive? Why was I not suspended from school and why am I not abusive to others?"

Is it my faith? Was it my parents or my upbringing or my extended family? Was it being raised in a small Midwestern town? Is my chemical make-up different from his? Did my teachers say different things to me? Was it because my parents were not a first generation move to the US or maybe because I'm a woman?"

I thought and thought and thought about these questions, these lists, these similarities and differences- and sure enough, to prepare for this morning I eventually re-read through our scriptures for this week, which of course speak directly to this dilemma of lists and separation. God working in mysterious ways never gets old...

Paul writes: You are all children of God... There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, nor male and female- for you are all one in Jesus. As we read through this list now, it's easier to swallow, because we are 2000 years separated from it. But imagine the list a modern day Paul would write...

You are all children of God. There is no longer

- Democrat, Republican or Independent
- Nor the wealthy 1%, Working Class or the Poor
- There are no Illegal Immigrants or Natural born citizens
- And no Persons of color or persons of no color
- There are no Advance placement children or children at risk
- There is not Gay or straight or transgender or bisexual
- There is no longer PC(USA) or Methodist or Roman Catholic or Lutheran or Church of Christ...
- And for that matter, there is no longer radical Islamist nor 'peaceful Presbyterian'

For you are all one in Christ Jesus.

That's why Beverly Gaventa wrote that Paul offends *virtually everyone* with this passage. This list of Paul's is *a bold list*. He is stripping away the things we use to separate ourselves: the divisive things we use to hold people at bay and the things we say to make ourselves feel different and better.

To be clear, Paul is NOT saying that the things that make us individuals are bad... the God given gifts we have from an eternally creative God that make each one of us special and different and all part of a diverse and beautiful world... Paul is not saying that those things are gone.

Paul IS saying that the things *we use* to divide ourselves shouldn't matter. The lines WE as humans create, not the creative differences that God makes, but the differences *we make* are no more, because of Christ. Now, because of our faith, the only thing that really matters is that we are part of the family of God. This is what we celebrate with each baptism: that we are unique children of God, but the most important thing about us is not what makes us different, but that we belong to the bigger family that includes everyone.

This is an incredibly difficult challenge... that we rejoice in our diversity while we overcome divisions to be one in Christ, to be one family. But Paul makes it clear that this is the goal. Even the psalmist articulates the struggle... repeating that 'my enemies laugh at me, and yet I hope in God.'

How do we do practically do this? How do we act in a way that says we are all part of one family? In particular for this week, how do we look at what is going on in Orlando and say with confidence and hope that *we are all children* of God? That we are all part of the same family... and that *that* is what matters most? How do we say this when praying for the

many people who lost their lives whether they are Latin or Gay or Muslim or immigrants or old or young or whatever... How do we really act in a way that shows those divisions don't matter?

GK Chesterton wrote that "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried."

The tragedy of our culture right now I think is that we as Christians aren't taking up the challenge to love others as part of the family—whether they come to our church or not. We love our own (and sometimes even that is a struggle), but we aren't going out of our way to be a family to everyone else as well.

We are reading the lists that the news gives us—and it's mostly true, but we aren't pausing to think about what we have in common with one another, even if the list is so short as to only say "We are all children of God, that is all we have in common and that is enough."

[I also want to say that if someone is part of a different religion or no religion at all, that doesn't mean that we are less responsible for treating them like a child of God. There is no longer Jew nor Greek. Jesus Christ came to offer the love of God for all people with no exceptions, and we are called to do the same... that's the Christian ideal that has been deemed too difficult to try.]

Friends, in remembering your baptism today, remember that you are a child of God. And so is everyone else. How will you go forth, loving the stranger as family? How will you push yourself in the name of Christ to love someone different from you? How will you remember that we are all heirs to the promises of God, and how will you take hope in God that to live a life like that is possible, even when others ridicule or laugh at you?

Will you send a letter to Pulse nightclub? Will you pray for the Muslims who are peaceful people, and now many of them are living in fear within our country? Will you reach out to someone in your life who is a loner and offer to be their friend? Will you think hard about the divisions we make, and consciously try to break them down with the love of Christ? Will you remember your baptism, and try to do all these things even if you fail? Will we together try to live as children of God?

May it be so.

Amen.