

October 17, 2021
Rev. Kerry Smith

Come Together: Breaking Down the Barriers
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Galatians 3:23–29

New Revised Standard Version

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 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 Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

On Tuesday of this week I was able to attend clergy retreat with other pastors in the North Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church. The pastor at Highland Park UMC, Paul Rasmussen, was our preacher and he told a story about a leaf. One day Paul was walking down the SMU Boulevard (go Ponies! 6-0!) and he saw a lot of lawn crew people working on a tree. There were two shrub trees side by side, one was green and one was brown. The lawn crew was spray-painting the brown tree to be green. Later, he picked up one of the spray-painted leaves and it sits on his desk where he can see it every day. This leaf is a reminder for him that we can be spray-painted green on the outside and dead on the inside.

We have to make sure that we are rooted in God so that we don't turn brown on the inside. Every day we pray, we exercise, we eat well, we read our Bible, we spend time in quiet, we share love, joy, kindness, and then we go bed early so we get enough sleep! The rhythm of our lives is important and it is easy for us to get out of whack. Worshipping God every Sunday helps me to stay on track. Putting my toes in sand and seeing the oceans every year helps me to stay peaceful. That rhythm of daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly rest and renewal is really important for us to feel God's presence with us.

Singing for me is a way that I feel God's presence with me. It is a means of grace for me. One of the songs that I learned as a youth I still sing in the car when I am nervous or scared or sad. "Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary. Pure and holy, tried and true. With thanksgiving, I'll be a living, sanctuary for you." Church has always been a safe place for me. Growing up in the church I found adults who were kind and patient. I learned the stories of Jesus and wanted to model my life after his. At church I found people who were honest and vulnerable.

When someone asks us, "How are you?" It's so easy for us to say "I'm fine" especially when it is as far from the truth as possible. In this place, we should be able to say the truth. I remember in my first church where I was a pastor, the District Superintendent would call me every month or so and ask how I was doing. Every single time he called, I would start crying, and then try to sound like I wasn't crying. I thought that I had to present this perfect front, I thought that I had to be spray-painted green like that tree at SMU, instead of saying, I'm scared, and I feel all alone.

Being in this place helps me to chip off some of the spray-paint. I know in this place that I am claimed and known and home. Here I can breathe deeply in the affirmation of my own belovedness. When I am in this sanctuary, I can just be. No matter what hard or awful thing is happening in my life or in this world, here I feel safe.

When Paul writes to the Galatians he describes the kind of perfect community, an ideal world, that Christ's love creates. It is an ideal where faith and belonging are what holds us all together rather than rigid boundaries and rules of law. This isn't a world where everyone is the same, differences in our stories and our backgrounds are celebrated. Paul emphasizes over and over in the letter to the Galatians that Gentiles, that is non-Jews, do not need to become Jews to

join with them in faith. This unity is not only for Christians or for Jews but for all children of Abraham, all children of God.

It is a world transformed by Christ where there is “no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male and female.” Those barriers that we put up, the divisiveness and the hierarchy that oppresses one group to preserve the privilege of another are erased. It is a world where there is an absence of the idea that one person or group is less valuable or less human or is less worthy of love and embrace. In the world defined by Christ’s love, we are all beloved children of God, and in God and one another we find belonging, home, affirmation, and safety. We find sanctuary.

This week I had coffee with someone from the church. They asked about what had been going on at the church lately and I shared about the UMC/UCC conversations that we have been having. This person looked at me and said that when all of the mess with the UMC happened in February 2019 and the rules against churches not hosting same gender weddings and gay clergy not being ordained were made even stricter, this person said that it took them back to their fundamentalist church upbringing. It really affected them and they have struggled with coming back to this sanctuary since.

The angry, tragic reality of our broken world is that many have not found sanctuary in churches. Many have experienced exactly the opposite of the kind of community that Paul describes in Galatians. Instead of belonging and unity, they have experienced rejection and judgment. So many of the people who have encountered church in this painful and damaging way are the people who need love and belonging and sanctuary the most.

There are so many days that I cry out to God wondering where we might find sanctuary from all that is so very broken in our world. We are a world where divisions and prejudices leave so many persecuted, isolated, and afraid. Yet we have Paul’s dream of the way the church and the world should be. It is the truth and promise we know in Jesus Christ. And the distance between our reality and the ideal world Paul describes seems impossibly, impossibly far.

When I think about breaking down barriers I think of an episode of *Mister Rogers Neighborhood* in 1969. At the time, Black Americans were not able to swim in the pool at the same time as white Americans. At community pools across the country, whites used intimidation and violence to prevent blacks from sharing the water with them. During *Mister Rogers Neighborhood*, white Mister Rogers asked black Police Officer Clemmons if he’d like to join him in soaking his bare feet in a children’s wading pool on a hot summer day.

Clemmons said he didn’t have a towel, and Mister Rogers said that Officer Clemmons could share his. Two men took off their shoes and socks, rolled up their pants and then swished their feet together in a shallow pool on a hot day. Their simple actions showed that a black man and a white one could peacefully share the water. When Officer Clemmons got out of the water, he used Mister Rogers’ towel to dry his feet and then Mister Rogers used the same towel. That casual intimacy exposed the bigotry of white people who were denying Black people access to a swimming pool or any other place in society.

Twenty-four years later, on Officer Clemmons last day on the Mister Rogers show, they recreated the pool scene. This time Mister Rogers took the towel and dried Officer Clemmons’ feet himself. Francois Clemmons said that he saw a connection to Jesus washing his disciples’ feet, “I am a black gay man and Fred washed my feet.” Jesus poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him (John 13:3-5).

How can we take hold of one another and breathe deep in the comfort of community and affirmation of our own belovedness? Then we are called to get about the work of doing justice and seeking the world of Paul's dreaming, the world of God's imagining, the world of Christ's promise. When that distance between us and the world to which we are called is so very far, remember that we are called to be the church in this world. We are called to be agents of racial reconciliation, of justice and inclusion for all people, and to being witnesses of Christ's radically transforming love. We are called to break down every wall and every barrier that divides us and sets us against one another so that we might be held together in one love.

Since church was always a safe space for me, I am so thankful for this place where we bear the promise of sanctuary to those who need refuge and safety and home and belonging. I pray that God would prepare Greenland Hills to be a sanctuary for everyone who needs it. For the people who come to this place eleven times a week for Narcotics Anonymous. For the children and youth in our midst. For the rainbow of people who call this place home. May we hesitate in our love and in our work for justice. This world is crying out for sanctuary, and God is looking at us. May we always be a living, breathing promise of grace and sanctuary. "Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary. Pure and holy, tried and true. With thanksgiving, I'll be a living, sanctuary for you."