

“Serving God Freely” CHC 6-19-16

1 Kings 19: 1-7; Galatians 3:23-29

I am fortunate. This Father’s Day I am reminded of a father who loved me and attended to me. Still, one of my fondest recollections is hanging out with my father on Friday nights. Every Friday after work my father would take me to dinner and a movie. I looked forward to it. Occasionally I would ask a friend to stay the night and go with us. I was proud to be with my dad.

There were times that I disappointed him. He disciplined me. Never harshly. The punishment was knowing that I could have done better, but didn’t. He was never effusive in saying he loved me. But I knew he did. His actions sustained that reality. He provided a relational bond that still goes deep. It is one I sought to provide my own children.

But some of you this morning may not share such warm feelings or experiences. Some have fathers who were abusive or abandoned the family. Who can love a father like that? So how do we reframe our understanding of a God who is often referenced as ‘Father’ throughout scripture? Do we write the description of God as Father out of the script and call God ‘our parent’? We all do what we have to do to connect with a positive image of God. The law shows us our sin, emphasizing that through it we cannot attain an intimate relationship with God. Why? So that we turn to Christ and receive the gift of his grace and love. Salvation lies in a relationship with a Savior who loves us.

Paul’s transformed understanding of the nature and character of God is a result of his encounter with the person, Jesus Christ. He describes his newfound experience of God this way; “But that now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Jesus Christ you are all children of God through faith”.

There is a difference between a father who is a harsh, strict disciplinarian and one who first and foremost views us as children to be loved. And so Paul says that before this understanding of God in the face of Christ, “before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed”.

What is he trying to tell us? Paul is helping us understand the role of the law in the plan of God. Understand, he is not negating the law. Rather, he sees it as a guardian leading us to something greater in our experience with God. Once again, the law shows us our sin, emphasizing that through it we cannot attain salvation so that we turn to Christ and receive the gift of his grace for salvation

Paul says that “we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed”. To understand this we go to the Greek world. In households there was a servant called the paidagogos. This slave had the responsibility to watch over the young son of the household to keep him out of trouble. He was the overseer of the child’s moral welfare and made sure he acquired the qualities essential to being a man. Every day he would take the child to school and deliver him to his teacher. He kept the child safe and out of trouble until the age of 16 when the boy is released from this relationship to choose and make decisions on his own.

In a similar manner this is a father and mother's role with a child. The rules of the house are there to protect and guide. The objective is to prepare the child for mature adulthood. Proverbs 4:1 reads, "Listen, children, to a father's instruction, and be attentive, that you may gain insight; for I give you good precepts; do not forsake my teaching".

Paul understands the function of the law similarly. It is there to lead us to Christ. How so? If we try to keep the law we quickly discover that we are unable to keep the full letter of it. It is a mirror revealing our moral and ethical failings. Realizing that we cannot attain salvation in this manner we cry out for grace, someone to relieve us from the often oppressive nature of the law. This grace is made known to us through Christ who frees us from the law's obligation, inviting us into a relationship with God. This relationship is not dependent upon keeping the law but entering into the law of love, Christ's love poured out in our hearts through faith. All actions and motivation springs from the heart which is now indwelled by Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Paul puts it this way, "Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came". The relationship is now with a person revealing the face and heart of God, not a structured set of rules we have to meet in order to be acceptable. God knows that won't work. And so Paul writes, "And as many of you were baptized into Christ have put on Christ". Our baptism is a symbol of our real union with Christ. We clothe ourselves with Christ, not the letter of the law.

Let me come at it another way. Author Philip Yancey tells about his father who contracted lumbar polio when Yancey was ten months old, dying three months later right after his first birthday. Later in his life his mother showed him an old crumpled photo. It was a picture of Yancey as a baby. She said his father fastened it to his iron lung along with those of his mother and two sons.

When his mother told him the story of the crumpled photo he describes having a strange reaction, but a powerful one. He reflects that it seemed odd to imagine someone whom he had never met caring for him. He writes, "Someone I have no memory of, no sensory knowledge of, spent every day thinking of me, devoting himself to me, loving me as well as he could".

He connects this story to his encounter with God's love through Christ in a college dorm room. Describing his emotions as the same when his mother told him of his father and the crumpled picture, he has a profound knowing that someone is there. Someone he can't see loves him. Someone is there watching life as it unfolds on this planet. He describes it as "a startling feeling of wild hope, a feeling so new and overwhelming that it seemed fully worth risking my life on" (Yancey, "Grace Notes", p.346-7).

With love and grace juxtaposed upon his anger and violent heart, Saul, on that road to Damascus, experiences a light from heaven flashing around him. Luke writes that "He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me'. Saul asks, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting'" (Acts 9:3-5).

Impacted by the powerful personal experience of love, Saul's eyes and heart become transformed. Everything looks different. How he sees people dramatically changes. Putting on Christ, being clothed with Christ in baptism, all people are seen as children of God. No distinctions.

What a contrast to Paul's pre-Christian life. Many times he prayed the Jewish prayer in the morning, thanking God that "Thou hast not made me a Gentile, a slave, or a woman".

Aristotle declares that only a comparatively few people could really live worthwhile lives. He names four classes of people who could never hope to do so. They are slaves, those who die young, those who are diseased, and paupers.

We still make distinctions and judgments about different groups of people. We differentiate social and economic status, illegal immigrants and legal, blacks and whites, poor and rich, male and female, Gay and Lesbians, Muslims and Christians and Jews, on we can go. Some political rhetoric feeds the xenophobia and differences, inciting fear of the other. Historically we have done it to Native Americans, the Japanese in WW II, and today we have our own versions. Hitler scapegoats the Jews, boasting white supremacy, legitimizing the slaughter of at least six million of them. Who will it be next? Human proclivity for hate has repeatedly reared its ugly head in our nation's history (Sojourners Magazine, Doug Pagitt).

Last weekend we witnessed two very different events. One was a tribute to a Black Muslim, Muhammed Ali. People from all cultural boundaries gathered together to pay tribute at his funeral. Christian ministers, Rabbis, Iroquois spiritual leaders, a Jewish comic, a black TV personality and a white politician born in segregated Arkansas came together in one place to honor this African American Muslim (News-Gazette, Leonard Pitts, Jr.).

The other, on the following Sunday, featured the slaying of at least fifty people and wounding dozens more by a Muslim man with a military assault rifle opening fire on Latin Night at a Gay nightclub. This event triggered Islamophobia, instilling fear of the other, separating people from each other.

Columnist Leonard Pitts Jr. highlights homophobia of a Baptist preacher, Roger Jimenez, in Sacramento. He tells his congregation that it was "great" that "50 pedophiles were killed today". He proceeded to call for the government to "round them all up and put them up against a firing wall and blow their brains out" (Pitts).

Paul reverses the distinctions and barriers that we place between people which often justifies our hate and fear of the other. Or we should say Christ reverses these distinctions and mindsets through his indwelling Spirit. "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".

We see how hatred of others clouds a man's ability to see the worth of human beings in the slaughter of many people in Orlando at the Pulse nightclub this past Sunday. His hate stole their earthly lives and his own humanity. As one person said, "As tragic as the shooting is, it will be a bigger tragedy if we allow an act of hate against one doubly marginalized community to be used as a justification to perpetuate hate against another doubly marginalized community---Muslim Americans" (Pagitt).

As a faith community Christ's love moves us to the radical inclusion of others we share in Christ. These words of Paul, hard won by Christ's working in his life, transcends and defies all the ways we attempt to

divide the human community. The truth and reality behind this text silences those who use other texts of the bible to engender hate and suspicion. As followers of Christ we live into God's vision of a people united by and within the love of God. God's kingdom reign on this earth among Christ's followers has no place for hate or the hierarchical categorization of others as to their value.

We are all debtors to God's grace and only when all are in Christ will we be one. As William Barclay so well frames it, "It is not the force of man but the love of God which alone can unite a disunited world" (Barclay, Galatians and Ephesians, p.33).

The cross is God's answer to violence and hate, pulling the world into the love revealed on Gethsemane. This is what the scripture proclaims the fatherhood of God looks like.

We all need the reconciling, transforming love of God, not only fathers but mothers and whole families who strive to live together in peace and love.