

Galatians 3:23-29

Indigenous Day of Prayer / Second After Pentecost

June 19, 2022

"I love you."

That's the best phrase in the English language.

I don't say it enough. I don't hear it enough.

Do you hear and say it enough?

We all need love.

The Good News of Jesus Christ is supposed to be that God loves us, unconditionally. But sometimes we get bogged down in the details.

The Church in Galatia asks Paul, "How much like a Jew, does a Gentile need to be in order to be a Christian?"

Their dilemma goes something like this: God make a covenant with Abraham: God would be his God, and would prosper and love him and all of his heirs and descendants. But who are his heirs? Who gets to claim that promised love? If it is the Jews, then how is the crucified Jesus and his Gospel relevant to them? If it is the Gentiles who have become heirs of God's promise to Abraham, then what about the Jews? Did God break his promise to them?

Should the Church focus on the continuing faithfulness of God to his promise to Abraham, and proclaim that only Jews can be Christians? Or should it emphasize that Gentiles are the new children of Abraham, and therefore that God's promises are not reliable? If so, how can it claim that Jesus is the Emmanuel—the God-with-us—promised in the Hebrew Scriptures?

Some in Galatia propose a solution: Gentile Christians should adopt at least those Jewish practices depicted in the covenant with Abraham - primarily circumcision. This will demonstrate the Church's continuity with the God of Abraham, and with a Judaism that the Romans are already familiar with and tolerant of.

But Paul rejects this compromise. If Gentiles must keep a part of the Law of Moses—that is, circumcision—in order to be Christian, why not all of it? And if Gentiles must keep the Law to be heirs of the Gospel, then what becomes of the central message of the Gospel, which is that God's unconditional love is made known through *God's* action in Jesus Christ? If God's unconditional love is conditional on *our* actions, then it is not unconditional.

Have you been part of a family, or a friendship, or a romantic relationship where love was turned on or off depending on whether you'd earned it that day?

Was that love?

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National Indigenous Peoples Day is June 21 in Canada: a time to recognize and to celebrate the heritage, cultures, and contributions of Indigenous peoples.

Canadians will recognize and celebrate them as a corrective to previous attitudes that did *not* recognize or celebrate them: attitudes that said, "you are not one of us, and you have no value, no culture worth recognizing, until you conform your culture, your dress, and your language to ours."

How European does an Indigenous person have to be before they are valued?

How Christian does an Indigenous person have to be, before they are loved by God and thus valued by European Christians?

In the Church we celebrate the Indigenous Day of Prayer on the Sunday previous—which is to say this Sunday— as a corrective, because we in the Church have gotten the answer to that question wrong.

Paul says, the purpose of the Law of Moses - circumcision, the dietary and clothing laws, the Sabbath, etc. - was to give us a model to emulate. Like a tutor, it restrained us, guarded us and molded us, preparing us for Christ's arrival. With his arrival, and God's work in Christ, we became fully mature, ready to fully inherit the promise of being God's beloved children.

Because human activity in itself is thus insufficient, because we are all made God's children through *God's* action, none of us are better than the other. There is no

hierarchy Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free: we are all equal in God through Christ.

You *are* loved. You *are* lovable. You *are* worthy, in God and through God, as revealed in Jesus. Regardless of how well or how poorly others may have loved you, regardless of how well or how poorly you may have loved others, you are loved.

Paul knows this. I know this. I hope you know this.

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Like Paul and the Galatians, like Jews and Christians of every time and place, we must ask ourselves how this love is made known in *this* time and place. Paul was resisting a theology which said that Gentiles had to become Jewish in order to be Christian. In so doing, he affirmed that "there is no Jew or Gentile in Jesus Christ."

Living in a changed context, we must be careful not to interpret this unity in Christ as sameness in Christ, and thus betray the very point Paul was trying to make. We do not have to assimilate into one cultural identity. There *is* Jew and Gentile, there *is* Settler and Indigenous, and *all are in* Jesus Christ. In trying to erase Indigenous culture, Settler Canada erased the expression of God in Indigenous people. Indigenous Christianity has gifts and insights to enrich the Christian enterprise.

Similarly, *you* have gifts and *you* have insights to offer *us*. Your presence enriches our Christian witness.

Let us remember that Paul is speaking to Jewish and Gentile *Christians*. He is not concerned, here, with other Jews, or with other Gentiles. He is speaking about Christianity, to Christians. However, two thousand years of religious history, and our Canadian context, requires us to think beyond the bounds of the Church. I have spoken of Indigenous Christians, but the National Indigenous Peoples Day celebrates all Indigenous Peoples, Christian or not. In Misison and Abbotsford we count Jews, Buddhists, Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims and atheists among our neighbours.

If we are all loved in God through Christ, how narrow is that "we"? Does God love Hindus? It seems strange, if not presumptuous, to say that God loves Hindus through Christ. And if you decide tomorrow that you are an atheist, does God still love you?

I think we have to extrapolate beyond the boundaries of the scripture a bit, just like Paul was doing. I would suggest that if God can love the Greek and Roman Gentiles of Jesus' time enough to go beyond the bounds of the covenant with Moses and include them through Jesus, then probably God loves Hindus also. And if God loves the diversity of Jew and Gentile, if God chooses to speak in all those languages at Pentecost, then God delights in the heritage, culture, and contributions of Indigenous peoples.

How Jewish must you be, to be Christian?

How European must you be, to be Christian?

How Christian must you be, to be loved?

It's the wrong question.

We are loved, not because of who we are, but because of who God is.