

FINDING COMMON GROUND
Galatians 3:23-29

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After visiting six different countries the past two weeks, I found myself humming the tune of Lee Greenwood's song as I touched back down in the U.S.A. a couple of days ago. While we were treated well everywhere we went, I'm proud to be an American where at least I know I'm free.

The Apostle Paul was proud to be a Christian for Christ had set him free. Spiritual freedom was on his mind when he wrote this little letter to the churches in the region of Galatia. Some might call this letter in the Bible a Christian declaration of independence.

Thomas Jefferson, in our national Declaration of Independence, declared: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." Saint Paul found all three of these things in the freedom that he experienced in his relationship with Jesus Christ.

IN CHRIST, THERE IS LIFE.

God likes life; he invented it. And so he invites us to live a life that is full, flowing, and free. You were not created to survive, you were created to thrive, to embrace each moment and to live each minute in the wonder of the gift that it is meant to be. The Bible, particularly the Gospel of John is high on life. In the prologue in Chapter 1:4 we read "*In Christ was life, a life that enlightened everyone.*" In John 14:6 we hear Jesus saying "*I am the way, the truth, and the life.*" And my favorite of all in John's gospel is in John 10:10: "*I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly.*" Have life to the max, have it complete. God likes life, he invented it and he wants us to live.

At our house, we've always made a big deal of birthdays. Oh, yes, we celebrate the other holidays as they come and go but we make a big deal out of birthdays. The tradition has now extended to our grandchildren. Our grandson, Caleb, who lives in Florida, celebrated his eighth birthday this week. He was visiting us about a month ago and he said to me "Poppy, it seems to me it is a right and good and proper thing that since you won't be in Florida for my birthday, we ought to celebrate it early while I'm in Nashville." And of course we had a birthday party for him while he was here. He visited his other grandmother about a week after that and he said to her, "You know you're not going to be in Florida during my birthday. I think it would be right that you have a party for me while I'm here." Last Thursday was Caleb's birthday and they celebrated at his house. When he called me afterwards he said, "We're going to still have one more party; we're going to have a pool party with all of my friends." Four for one, I think that's a pretty good deal. Caleb is a kid after my own heart.

I like birthdays. They are not about accomplishments or achievements or

activities. Birthdays are about being. Once you were not, now you are. Birthdays are not about what was or even about what might be. Birthdays are about what is. Birthdays are about today. It's good that you are alive today. Thanks be to God.

Here in Galatians, Paul takes this birthday idea a step further. You see, Paul has found new life in Christ. In the waters of baptism he has been born again and what the law could not do, Christ did for him. Paul got his life back, indeed he did. Love replaced hate, freedom replaced rigidity, guilt was traded for grace, passion took the place of power. What God did for Paul he wants to do for you. Christ can give you new life. He can give you meaningful life. He can give you everlasting life. In Christ there is life.

IN CHRIST, THERE IS LIBERTY.

John 8 says it this way: "*If Christ sets you free, you are free indeed!*" Have you thought about that? "*If Christ sets you free you are free indeed.*"

Robert Fulghum tells the story about trying to ride herd over 80, 7-10 year-olds in a church fellowship hall while their parents were in the sanctuary for a very important meeting. Fulghum writes, "I didn't know what to do so I finally decided we would play a little game of Giants, Wizards and Dwarfs, a game that has no redemptive purpose except to have people run around and chase each other from place to place until nobody knows which side you are on or who won.

"The excitement had reached a critical mass," writes Fulghum when I announced 'Decide now which you are - a Giant, a Wizard, or a Dwarf!' The words were hardly out of my mouth when a little girl pulled at my pant leg and said, 'Where do the mermaids stand?' Fulghum said I looked down at her and said, 'There are no mermaids in this game.' 'But I'm a mermaid' insists the girl who was not about to stand in the corner until the game was over." So Fulghum takes her hand and lets her stand by him, the newly identified King of the Sea. And then he draws this point—"Where do the mermaids stand? If you can answer that question," says Robert Fulghum, "you can build a school, you can build a church, you can build a country, you can build a world." Where do the mermaids stand?

When it comes to church politics I've always felt a little bit like that girl. I've always been too liberal for conservatives and too conservative for liberals. I've never found a denominational caucus that ever wanted me as a member. I've served with a deep conviction that Annual Conferences should not to be closed-shop labor unions and so I defined itinerancy in a much broader perspective than my colleagues. At this stage of ministry I'm glad to say I know only one thing. I belong to only one thing. I belong to Christ. Christ has set me free. In Christ you can find a place to be. That's all that really matters. In Christ you can be free.

Could that be what Paul had in mind when he wrote: When you are clothed in Christ *there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female.* Now imagine that in the first century A.D. In Christ all are one. In Christ the division disappears. In Christ you don't have to be in some category any more. In Christ you can be free.

I submit to you today that someday it's not going to matter whether you are Methodist or Baptist, Catholic or Protestant, clergy or laity, immersed or sprinkled, Republican or Democrat, male or female, straight or gay, a saint or a sinner because all of these divisions are going to be washed away by the blood of Christ who makes us righteous and clothes us in himself. I believe that with all my heart. O Lord, hasten the day, I pray. O Lord, hasten the day!

IN CHRIST, THERE IS HAPPINESS.

Happiness is – well, how would you define it? When Thomas Jefferson wrote about it in the Declaration of Independence it had to do with property and money. “Go west, young man, go west.” And so, by the thousands people did that. They went west to Kentucky and Tennessee to find the wide, open spaces. They went west to California and Alaska to find the gold that would make them rich. Such pursuits did not bring much happiness.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the pursuit of happiness was toward technology and major advancements in medicine. We learned how to control the environment, enjoy our pleasure rides in new automobiles, and to remedy many of the illnesses that we faced in life. We are living longer. We are also sucking up more pollution than we ever breathed before. Are we any happier now than we were then? Happiness is... well, how would you define it?

Those of us who came to adulthood in the Age of Aquarius thought happiness could be found in artificial highs, free love, and therapy for every anxiety under the sun. But I want to tell you that hot tubs and music concerts in themselves will never make us happy. MacDonald's is in the happiness business. They'll sell you a Happy Meal. Neighborhood bars offer happy hours. Cosmetic surgeons will give you a happy face, for a price, of course. You can play a country song backwards and it will tell you how to get your wife back, your truck back, and maybe your gun back. The bluebird of happiness seems always to slip and slide away. Happiness is...well, how would you define it?

What if happiness is not competition or comparison or, for that matter, even completion? What if happiness is about contentment? It seems to me that's what the Bible says. Jesus said, “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness for they will be satisfied.*” What a great word. What a promise! *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness for they will be satisfied.* Paul says “*I have learned to be content, whatever circumstances.*” What faith! The writer of Hebrews says “*Be content, for God has promised never to leave you nor forsake you.*” What hope!

What if happiness is not chasing after some achievement or trying to meet some particular goal. What if happiness is becoming content wherever we are? What if happiness is an inside job? What if happiness resonates throughout our very being when we discover our purpose for being on earth? What if happiness is the result of harmony inside the soul that comes when we make peace with God and peace with ourselves? Are you happy?

What right do I have to talk about happiness? Who am I to promise anybody

happiness? Only God can do that. All I know to do is testify to the peace in my heart:

There's a peace in my heart, that the world never gave,
A peace it cannot take away.
Tho' the trials of life, may surround like a cloud,
I've a peace that has come there to stay.

That's happiness.

So, Paul says to those early churches, "*Clothe yourselves in Christ. Clothe yourselves in Christ and live. Clothe yourselves in Christ and be set free. Clothe yourselves in Christ and find contentment in every circumstance of life. Clothe yourselves in Christ.*"