

Holy, Holy, Holy One, guide us by the Spirit of truth to hear the Word of life you speak, and to give all glory, honor, and praise to your threefold name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This week's epistle scripture is from the last chapter of Paul's letter to the Galatians. The big issue that Paul was addressing in this letter was the issue of circumcision. It would seem that after Paul had organized this church (or churches) another group of Christian Jews came through and told the fledgling congregation that they were doing it wrong. These new proselytizers were claiming that not only did the men need to be circumcised, but that the new followers should also celebrate Jewish holidays and follow many, if not all, of the Jewish laws, including dietary laws.

Paul has a problem with this because it leaves no room for the grace of Jesus Christ. As I hope you all know by now; following the law is a good idea, but it is not what guarantees us a place in heaven; only the love of God through the grace of Jesus Christ can make that certain.

Much like those would be apostles and the Galatians of the past, many of us today have the same problem. No, we aren't worried about circumcision anymore, but we do seem to like to create litmus tests for being Christian. We've all probably heard the term litmus test before, but what does it actually mean? Merriam Webster says, "It was in the 14th century that scientists discovered that litmus, a mixture of colored organic compounds obtained from lichen, turns red in acid solutions and blue in alkaline solutions and, thus, can be used as an acid-base indicator. Six centuries later, people began using litmus test figuratively. It can now refer to any single factor that establishes the true character of something or causes it to be assigned to one category or another. Often it refers to something (such as an opinion about a political or moral issue) that can be used to make a judgment about whether someone or something is acceptable or not."

So, what do we use today as a litmus test to decide if someone is Christian or not? I guess many would agree that to be a Christian one should believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior. That is one litmus test that I can get readily behind, but that's not the only litmus test that people use. Some would say that you have to believe in the literal inerrancy of the Bible; some would say that you cannot be LGBTQ; some would say that you are supposed to give all your material possessions away; some would say that you must be a democrat, or a republican; and the list goes on and on. We seem to always want to put extra conditions on letting someone be a Christian.

I remember a time when people were saying that rock and roll, or heavy metal music were the tools of the devil, and you couldn't be a Christian if you listened to it. I also remember a time when they said that you couldn't play roleplaying games; because they would lead you to satanism and evil. In fact, there are still some who I know believe these things. Well I can tell you that I know many people, pastors included, who like to listen to rock and roll and play Dungeons & Dragons and we have not become devil worshippers; far from it.

One commentator says that they were once told very earnestly that Christians should never listen to opera. I also remember reading that in the late 1500's organs were considered too much for many of the church reformer's like John Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli, both of whom felt that the human voice singing psalms was enough. Organs were taken out of churches and destroyed for over one hundred years. During the 1800's organ music was too cosmopolitan and secular for some churches and was banned then as well. My point being that perhaps litmus tests should be used for science instead of Christianity.

I think there are two things we can take away from Paul's teachings for today. First; the true gospel produces a church in which unity exists with remarkable diversity. Sometimes the diversity is truly spectacular. Dr. Daniel Chetti; an American Baptist Church missionary to

Beirut tells of Muslims who have come to love Jesus Christ. The All-Saints International Congregation in Beirut Lebanon welcomes such to the Communion table whether or not they have been baptized, since baptism for a Muslim can lead to disinheritance, being shunned by family, or even death. They faced the question; Shall communion be open to anyone? They decided that it should. It wasn't until the last General Assembly that our denomination changed our rules about how open our Communion officially was. Technically until that point our communion was only available to those who were baptized as Christian, but I'm guessing that none of you were ever asked to show your official baptism card when you came up to receive the sacrament. At one point in some Presbyterian Churches in the United States people would have to come to church the day or week before communion to confess their sins and receive an official token or marker that would allow them to take communion.

Now we are more concerned about if the person is a believer in Jesus Christ, and that is between them and God. If there is no belief, then communion means nothing and has no benefit for them anyway. As I say each time after the words of Institution "this is the Table of God, for the children of God." We celebrate at God's table and God will decide who is worthy and who is not. It may surprise us whom God thinks is worthy, compared to our own expectations. People of different races, denominations, opinions, desires, and yes, maybe even faiths are all included in God's unity.

The second thing that should be mentioned is that the true gospel produces a church of miraculous unity. Let me give you a couple of examples. The Amish community in Nickel Mines Pennsylvania is legendary for its response to the horrific slaughter of five young girls and the severe wounding of seven more. How the community reacted shows us all exactly how dedicated they are to the gospel of Jesus Christ. They showed radical forgiveness by, for starters, forgiving the person who shot all those girls, but that wasn't where their dedication ended. They contacted the shooter's family, who were their neighbors, and gave them food, the very same day those tragic shootings occurred. Later they shared with that same family a portion of the money that came in from all across the country from people who wanted to help them. If you ask me that is truly some amazing grace there.

Does this mean that we all should give up our cars, disconnect the electricity, and start to wear clothes with no zippers? Do we need to follow all their behaviors to also be faithful to Jesus Christ?

Paul would say "NO!" He would say, "If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit." It's not about all the outward trappings; those things don't necessarily matter in the end. It's about showing that grace given to us by Jesus Christ in how we treat others.

Another group of examples has happened in various places; including the Middle East, Egypt, and the United States and Canada. There have been cases of religious extremists attacking houses of worship. In 2011 thousands of Muslims created a circle of protection around Coptic Christian churches to protect them while they worshipped. The favor has been returned by Christians and Jews in the United States and Canada encircling Mosques to protect the people worshipping there and groups of Muslims and Christians have done the same thing around Jewish synagogues as well.

We may have different words for God, we may have different traditions, but all these religions trace their roots to the God of the Old Testament. We are all united in that ancestry.

What are we to take away from today? In the end it's not the actions that we do to make things better for ourselves that matter; it's our actions towards others that matter. As Paul says,

“So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.” Let us continue to strive for the good of all Amen.