

## ALL THE SAME

Galatians 3:21-29 [MW21-01]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Kaiwaka and Wellsford, Sunday 07 February 2021

Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians these startling and earth-shattering words: (3:28)  
*Faith in Christ Jesus is what makes each of you equal with each other, whether you are a Jew or a Greek, a slave or a free person, a man or a woman (CEV)*

Can you feel the shock waves?

- “equal with each other”: BOOM!
- “Jew and Greek” equal: BOOM!
- “slave or free person, man or woman” ... equal: KABOOM!

If we're honest these words don't exactly leap off the page for us

- they don't seem strange or out of place  
but that's perhaps because of the world we live in
- a world where “women can do anything”  
a cosmopolitan society with no servants or slaves
- yet it's not that long ago that things were very different  
even in good old NZ
- even in the church – vestries used to be all men, who wore ties to the meetings

When Paul wrote to the Galatians, these words:

*Faith in Christ Jesus is what makes each of you equal with each other*

- would not have found immediate assent and acceptance  
just like Mr Spock on the starship Enterprise might say  
this idea of equality was “illogical”
- Jews were the people of God, God's chosen, specially singled out  
no Greek, no Gentile, no foreigner could ever be that, could ever be “equal”
- slaves and free people equal – how ridiculous is that!  
and as for men and women, well they each had their place  
and it was definitely nowhere near equal

Yet Paul states categorically:

*In Christ's family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female.  
Among us you are all equal (The Message)*

Now, Paul was a Roman citizen – he should have known things were not equal

- he would have learned it as he grew up  
the Romans were in charge but even among Romans  
some were more equal than others
- there were ranks in the army and in society  
sure all Romans were Romans, but not all were equal
- and if you disagreed or went against this  
you'd likely find yourself in the arena!

Then again, even among Rome's subject peoples there was no equality

- look at the Jews, they'd arranged a ‘special deal’  
they kept their religion and their temple and a measure of self-government

So these words: *Among us you are all equal*

- should be flashing in three metre high neon with alarm bells ringing and sirens wailing
- we tend to gloss over these words but this is definitely not a statement to be glossed over

Try to get your head around, try to imagine if you can

- what a huge shift Paul had made in order to understand the truth of these words to write them, and to try to convince others to accept them
- in the Jewish morning prayer, which Paul would have used all his life until he met Jesus Christ
- the male Jew thanks God that "Thou hast not made me a Gentile, a slave, or a woman"
- take a moment to let that sink in Paul takes this prayer, which came as naturally to male Jews as breathing and completely reverses it!
- the old distinctions are gone: all are one in Christ

What makes this possible? What makes the change?

- Jesus Christ
- baptism
- putting on Christ as new clothes are put on
- putting on a new life
- when people do this, everybody is equal everybody is equal in God's sight and each other's sight

This is revolutionary, it is world shaking

- and gives us a glimpse of why Jewish authorities, Romans and others wanted to stamp out this fledgling religion
- it was just too dangerous: it would destroy the fabric of society as we know it it would turn the whole thing upside down ...
- ... yet it didn't, it didn't ...

Women for example certainly featured prominently in the leadership of the early church

- but this wasn't reflected anywhere else slavery was not abolished and nor did slaves rise up to overthrow their masters
- yet in the church's meetings and activities everyone was indeed equal and that stood out and was noticed

Then something seemed to happen

- the idea and the reality of equality in Christ faded this is a generalisation and a quick sweep of a history that is complex and intertwined
- but basically the church became an instrument of order: hierarchical order everyone had their place and it was ordained by God and there was no changing
- from the serf in the field, to the foot soldier in the barracks to the smith in the forge, the merchant in his store the lord in his manor, to the king in his castle
- all had their ordained place in the hierarchy of life and that was the way things were!

There was no question foreigners were lesser mortals

- slaves and even servants had no life but what their masters deigned to give them and women had few, if any, rights at all

*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 (NRSV)*

- the church had these words in its sacred text yet these words seemed to make no impact on how the church ordered itself or its people
- and they made no difference at all to the world around them

That was the “old world”

- a world which many reacted against by going off in search of a new life in the “new world”
- in this “new world” things could be different people did not have to accept the way things were
- something of the struggle between the old and new worlds between traditional ways of doing things and fresh pioneering understandings can be seen in the American “Declaration of Independence”
- and the conflict which followed

Listen to these fine words from the American Declaration of Independence:

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

Sounds great doesn't it?!

- all men are created equal of course it says “men”, it was a product of its time
- but still high sounding ideals that echoed St Paul yet not long after these words were written these same people engaged in a bloody conflict stemming from a call for the abolition of slavery
- hold on though, didn't they agree all men were created equal? later in its history this same great nation, founded on equality in the Creator's sight had long hard struggles over women's rights civil rights for blacks, African Americans
- and don't even think about the place of native Americans ...

Just like last week we learned you can't pay your own fine

- we can't do this “equality” thing by ourselves no matter how many declarations, laws or United Nations commissions we have
- equality, the recognition of our common humanity, is a gift a gift which comes from Jesus Christ
- the glimpses we have of those early church gatherings are to inspire and encourage us: rich society women, lowly slaves, ignored children, hated foreigners all gathered as one happy family
- a foretaste of the kingdom of heaven on earth that's what Paul was getting at
- we are all the same and come recognise this and live it out in our relationships when we act in faith and accept the free grace of God
- receiving and putting on new life

I'd like to conclude with a glimpse of life that seems to me to bring some of this to life

- it's from a book written by the pastor of a church a bit like ours
- except he lives in a small town in Indiana in the United States
- it's titled "Hardware Heaven"

One glorious feature of Bakers Hardware was that you could buy just one of what you needed. Not long ago I required one bolt to repair my son's bicycle, but had to buy a package of twelve bolts to get the one. I'll never use the other eleven bolts, but paid \$2.50 for them and won't throw them away. I put them in my workshop next to a package of eleven screws. I've recently come across a small hardware store which sells individual nuts and bolts. When I'm feeling nostalgic, I saunter in, plink my dime on the counter, and order one bolt. The owner deposits it in a small paper bag, folds the top, and hands it to me with his wish for a good day. I wish every business transaction were as congenial.

Trust was operative at Bakers. If you told Les, the counterman, you had ten screws at three cents each, your word sufficed. "That'll be thirty cents," he'd say, "plus a penny for Uncle Sam." Rawleigh once hired a man who counted our purchases rather than take our word on them. This was an embarrassment and made us feel immoral, as if we'd been caught by the Reverend Taylor buying a top-shelf magazine at the Rexall.

Bakers took cash, check, or charge. By "charge" I don't mean MasterCard or Visa. I mean telling Les to charge it to your account, which you would settle at months end. My days as a freewheeling spender began when I learned about charging. I was eleven years old and went into Bakers, picked up a pocketknife, and asked Les to charge it to my father's account. I felt terribly important scrawling my name on the bottom of the note. My days as a freewheeling spender came to an abrupt end when my father got the bill.

I came by my nickname at Bakers. I had gone there to buy some fence staples and, without knowing what they were called, asked Les where they kept the u-nails. He started laughing and asked me what a u-nail was. After that, whenever I walked in, he'd call out, "Here comes old U-nail!" That's the curse of being from a small town. I could go off and get a doctorate in nuclear physics, come back home, and still be known as the man too dumb to know what fence staples are called.

Baker's closed down a few years after I left home. One of those hardware chains long on lawn chairs and bolts-by-the-dozen moved in, and Bruce, Rawleigh's boy, didn't feel like doing battle. The new hardware store doesn't have wooden floors, and the counterperson doesn't call out your name when you walk in the door. They don't give credit, either.

Sometimes people ask me what I think heaven is like. I tell them it has wood floors and you get what you need with a minimum of fuss. The counterman not only knows your name, but your daddy's, and can even recall when your mother was in high school and dated Herbert Riggle, who played center on the '53 team that won the sectionals.

Trust abounds there. And fellowship so warm and gracious you could linger forever - - which you can.

[from *Front Porch Tales* by Philip Gulley]

Paul concludes:

*You are all the same in Christ Jesus. You belong to Christ, so you are Abraham's descendants.*

*You will inherit all of God's blessings because of the promise God made to Abraham.*