

“Lead With Love”

Galatians 3:23-29

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Now before faith came,
we were imprisoned and guarded under the law
until faith would be revealed.

Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came,
so that we might be justified by faith.

But now that faith has come,
we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian,
for in Christ Jesus
you are all children of God through faith.

As many of you as were baptized into Christ
have clothed yourselves with Christ.

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.

And if you belong to Christ,
then you are Abraham's offspring,
heirs according to the promise.

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I.

I would like to begin today with the notion of vulnerability. *Vulnerability*, as defined by the dictionary, is the capability of being wounded or hurt; being open to criticism or attack. Now there are different kinds of worship, different styles, different formats, different intents. However, the *best* worship, no matter the difference in variety, is worship which encourages you to become *vulnerable*. The limits of worship are set by the willingness of one's heart and one's mind to either let down, or keep up, the walls which insulate us from each other, from the world in which we live, and from our God.

II.

Worship is a risky business. Beyond walking into a church for the first time, which is an incredibly courageous act, *every* occasion for worship involves some degree of vulnerability and, hence, some degree of risk. We sit right up close to people. We eat food from the same tray, we touch and hug one another, we stand up in front of each other and share our problems and misfortunes we sing, we laugh, and we even cry together. We make ourselves vulnerable to one another. We do this not out of weakness, however, but out of a willingness to reveal ourselves to our sisters and brothers in faith.

Today is Father's Day, and I must confess that I've really been looking forward to it. After church I'm going to have a big old brunch read the newspaper on the front porch, have a strong cup of coffee, then I'm going to head to my chair, crossword puzzle in hand, and take a nice quiet nap. This is really no different from what I do on any other Sunday, but at least today I'll have an excuse.

III.

The fact that I am a dad has been greatly on my mind this past year. Being a parent, in general, is really quite a job; pretty much a “learn as you go” type of deal, with *many* opportunities to improve as you learn from your constant mistakes. As my mother would always say, it is the hardest job you'll ever

love, and one which, seemingly, has no end and requires you to be constantly adapting and evolving.

It has been my experience, though, that being a dad, in specific, is *particularly* challenging. Not that being a mother isn't challenging as well, but the roles and responsibilities that come with being a dad are just a little bit different somehow. Of late, I have come to realize that although I am still my own person, with my own dreams and concerns, more and more of who I am is a father trying very hard to provide for the dreams and concerns of my children.

IV.

I would like to think that today I am a better father than I was yesterday, but not as good of a father as I will endeavor to be tomorrow. I would hope that as my children grow, I, too, will grow to be a better dad. That I will still be firm, but learn to be more flexible. Remain clear in my direction, but strive to be open to the harder questions my kids present to me; those which aren't so cut and dried. That I will be consistent with guidance, but delight more in compassion. Continue to pay attention to detail, but keep a greater eye on the big picture. And, as the years pass, I would hope that I could become less of a disciplinarian, and more of a man who leads his family with love.

V.

From where I sit right now, at 57 years old, with three kids ages 29, 23 and almost 21, it seems that what is important for me is to struggle, really struggle, to be more vulnerable to my children. They still need, and will no doubt get (*as they will surely tell you*) the appropriate boundaries that every child needs to feel safe within, and grow against.

However, the extra that they must have to *flourish*, is really something that only I, as their father, can give them; that is, to let them know me as I *truly* am. I'm sure that now, as my kids are adults, it comes as a fairly big surprise to them to discover that I am actually a pretty fun guy (*as my parishioners, you may find this surprising as well*). In actuality, I don't mind bending the rules (at all) and, upon occasion, I've *even* been known to break a few! *Shhhh!*

VI.

It isn't so much that I'm an outlaw, but I have come to believe that rules and regulations are for *yesterday's* reality. It is our job as creative, life-affirming people to move ourselves into a new and better reality where the old rules have no bearing. So, it isn't so much that I *like* bending rules, but I do try very hard to move *beyond* them. And I think this is an important thing for my children to realize about me.

In large part, I think this is the gist of what is happening in today's text from Galatians chapter 3. The Apostle Paul is speaking to a Jewish faith community about what they must do to adapt to the Gospel, and evolve into followers of Christ; with an impassioned eloquence, Paul gives to them a very valuable lesson about Christian Liberty.

VII.

Let us must remember that Paul is speaking to a group of people who have had heard nothing but the party line about the Law and 10 Commandments for generation upon generation. Like children growing up in a rather strict household, this is all they ever knew. They didn't even know there was anything different to know. And in fact, there wasn't. Because everything that Paul is saying to them, is *brand spanking new*. For Paul, the Christ event, his life, death and resurrection, ushered in something which had never before been seen in the history of the world: a God who would become *vulnerable*. Let's chew on *that* awhile.

VIII.

When people envision their God, what images do they conjure? A God capable of being wounded or hurt; one who is open to criticism or attack? No. Instead, they imagine:

- *Poseidon* the keeper of the unfathomable ocean depths.
- *Ra* riding the chariot of the sun across the sky
- *Achilles* waging war with near invincibility.

The Jewish people were no different. Theirs is a God who they believed simply spoke the creation into existence. A God who dwelt upon high mountains, danced upon the clouds and visited the earth with a fiery wrath. A God who could not even be looked upon, lest you were consumed. A God who gave the

Law and demanded obedience to it. A God who, when asked his name, simply said: "I will be, who I will be."

IX.

Such a God is easy to imagine. However, when your God turns out to *also* be a poor and humble carpenter who gave himself up to the cross, well, that can be a hard thing with which to live. And it turns out that it isn't so easy to just let God be who God will be.

So, now we begin to understand the enormity of the task Paul has taken on in his letter to the Galatians. Yes, it is true, God once was all about the Law, and our imprisonment to it, Paul says. Before, we were subject to this great disciplinarian. Now, now however, *Christ* has come and we are justified by faith, *not* by our obedience to the law.

X.

Before it mattered if you were Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. But now we have *all* been baptized into Christ, such that each of us has become a Child of God, an heir to the Kingdom. *This* is who God is choosing to be now...do you believe it? Truth be told, most people don't; I'm not so sure the Galatians did either. It is hard pill to swallow, to be sure, because it emphasizes devotion rather than obedience.

We are not here today because we *have* to be, we are here because we *want* to be. There is within us, as so many of you demonstrate every day, a willingness to be honest about who we *really* are; in front of God, and in front of our brothers and sisters in faith. The world may look at our vulnerability and see weakness, but in letting ourselves be known, we feel nothing but strength.

XI.

At some point in the tumultuous relationship between God and the creation, God made a choice to seek devotion ahead of obedience; with the result being the cross. In so do, God made Godself vulnerable to us such that we have the freedom, what Paul calls Christian Liberty, to *chose* to devout ourselves to God. We do this with our faith, and with our actions which follow from our faith.

Correspondingly, the most faith-filled act we can offer is to give those around us, especially our children, the opportunity to love us for who we *actually* are, and not for who we *pretend* to be, or think we might need to be. By coming to this worship service today to shake hands, hug, and share your stories, you bravely stand as the child of God you have been Baptized with Christ to be; *you* belong to Christ, *you* are Abraham's offspring, *you* are an heir according to the promise of the cross.

XII.

However, faith builds upon faith, and so now before us stands an even bigger challenge: to leave the safety of this sanctuary, and to make ourselves vulnerable to the world.....*out there*. Our hope for today, is that in time this world will see us as neighbors, siblings, children, spouses, parents, and, especially, as fathers who open ourselves up to vulnerability, moving beyond rules, in order that we may lead with love. Amen.