

Galatians 1:10

Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

Galatians 3:23-29

²³Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. ²⁴Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, ²⁶for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There 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. ²⁹And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, ^[k] heirs according to the promise.

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Galatians 1:10; 3:23-29

Words that Include

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A story from St George and the Dragon, by Edward Hayes:

Once upon a time, began the dragon, a great samurai warrior with two great swords hanging from his belt approached a monk and said, 'Tell me holy monk, about heaven and hell.' The orange-robed monk looked up at the warrior from where he sat and replied in a quiet voice, 'I cannot tell you about heaven and hell because you are much too stupid.' The samurai warrior was filled with rage. He clenched his fists and gave a fierce shout as he reached for one of his swords. 'Besides that you are very ugly,' added the monk. The samurai's eyes flamed and his heart was incensed as he drew his sword. 'That' said the little monk, 'is hell.' Struck by the power of the words and the wisdom of the teaching, the warrior dropped his sword, bowed his head and sank to his knees. 'And that,' said the monk, 'is heaven.'

You see, continued the dragon, the words of the monk touched old wounds, perhaps wounds that were made when the warrior was a child and was called stupid, dumb, or ugly. It was his wounds that caused hell to capture him. All of us have wounds – old ones and new ones – and whenever the monster appears, when hell breaks loose, we know that our old wounds are talking, guiding us. It is these wounds that must be confronted, and not the poor, innocent dragon.

It's difficult to talk about the words that can heal us before we talk about the words that wound us. We can probably all remember words that have excluded us, from a parent's approval, from a

friend's support, from a lover's trust. I love Robert Fulghum's reworking of an old proverb that I always hated. You know the one that goes "Sticks and stones may break our bones..." The one that has us repeat the lie that words can never hurt us. Oh, indeed words do hurt us, so Fulghum reworks the adage, "Sticks and stones may break our bones, BUT words will break our hearts." It's true. The power of words to inflict harm goes deep.

One might think then, that the Biblical Word, God's divine love letter, would be soothing and calm, a guided meditation with every page turn. But that is definitely not the case. Scripture is, rather, a glaring tale of the worst of humanity and God's continued attempts to pull us out of the weeds.

Paul, in writing to the Galatians, is convinced that there are those in the community of believers sowing a false narrative of the gospel. The message matters to Paul more than anything else, so we know that he'll do just about anything to make sure the Word about Jesus Christ is rightly proclaimed. So, he asks his readers in the beginning of the letter if we think he is out to please people. Your thoughts? Do you see the apostle Paul as a genuine spokesperson for civility in conversation? Quite the contrary. He argues publicly with Peter. He calls these new converts foolish and asks them if they've been bewitched. He wonders in his letter if his time spent teaching them was all for nothing, a waste of time. Without much thought for what's been sacrificed, he tells the men that if they have been circumcised thinking that they could get closer to Jesus it was a mistake because now they obligated themselves to keeping the whole law. Was Paul very kind, or humble, or thoughtful with his words? Not so much.

But as an apostle, a spokesperson on behalf of the message of Jesus Christ, his words were preserved for us to pore over for centuries to come. We could print a redacted version of scripture, eliminating Paul's rude and painful expressions. I'm not sure I want to teach

congregation members to talk to one another like he did necessarily. But I do want to articulate that I pray for Christians to be as passionate as Paul was passionate, and to feel just as deeply convinced and convicted about the love of Jesus Christ as he was. It means if you must swear like Paul for emphatic effect, so be it. Remember that he also wrote that the rest of his life was about as worthless as a dung pile, compared to what he knew coming from the gospel. That's from Philippians if you want to look it up.

I am sure that Paul offended his audiences as often as he connected with them, though it seems clear from the biblical account that he did both to the extremes. But I think it's vitally important that we make clear, as Paul tried, maybe unsuccessfully, to make clear, that it was always a "what" that he hated, not a "who." He hated that a false message was drawing the attention of the Galatians. He hated that Peter was obligating new converts in a way he found excessive. He hated that his people were being fooled or beguiled into a legalistic practice when they had been moved to faith by the Spirit.

Though Paul spent time in each of these communities teaching and preaching, what we know him for is what is left behind, his writing. And because our communities of faith are not exactly the same as his, it can take some study and imagination for our ears to hear as those early listeners could understand. Yes, Paul can sound like a bully. He's pointed and crass, and does not hesitate to use bold language to make his points. But he also speaks with an inclusion that would have been practically unheard of in his day. When he says there is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave nor free, no longer male and female – jaws would have dropped open. To claim that they, that big of a they, were all one in Christ Jesus was completely unfathomable.

You are ALL children of God. You are ALL clothed in Christ. You are ALL Abraham's offspring. You are ALL heirs of the promise. All. A – L – L, ALL. And just in case you were

wondering, that means ALL nationalities, including those as different as Jew and Greek. That means ALL socio-economic levels, including those as divergent as slave and free. That means ALL genders, from the male-est of the males, to the female-est of the females, and everyone in between. Males and females are counted, equally in this case as the children of God, heirs of the promise, no difference between them.

This is so important what Paul is saying because it undoes the hell that the samurai faces in the opening story. When we are labeled, whether it is a label like stupid or ugly, or whether we are labeled as “illegal” when the born-here’s are more important, or labeled as a bum leeching off society when the wealthy are admired regardless of how they obtained their wealth, or labeled as somehow not masculine enough or feminine enough to fit the social norms of our own time and place – those are wounds that cut deep. We carry those injuries with us in the brokenness of our hearts. The only way to heal from these wounds is to be able to drop to our knees and recognize that they do not define the story of our lives.

Words can make all the difference.

Much of the conversation about language now is about the civility of words, and in an uncivil culture, the desire for more kindness in our discourse I have to believe is a good thing. Can we say what we want to say without harming others with our words? I hear the deep desire to drop the snarkiness and the judgment that floods much of what we hear – from both national and social media, and whether it’s from high powered voices or the people that we know in our daily lives. Politeness is still a virtue in my book. But mere civility isn’t enough to get at the deep transgressions of the words that break our hearts. We need something more than tolerance or sanitization of our language to offer real healing.

Paul was a jerk with words, at times. And yet, these few verses to the Galatians are enough to allow us to imagine the kind of heaven where that hurt falls away and we fall to our knees knowing that all, ALL are the beloved children of God. But even more importantly, the hurt falls away and you know: YOU are a beloved child of God. When this is known... Those words that have twisted your stomach and knotted you up in fear will be cosmically erased for good. Those words that made you hide who you really are, you will know are not the words that define you. Those words that have made you draw your sword and fight anyone who says them get transformed from dragons that must be fought to a source of power and protection for others who might be injured in their wake.

Paul had his moments. The Bible, for as honest as it is about humanity's failures, is just as hopeful about humanity's future. No matter how wounded we are, it is possible to trust in the steadfast love of our living God. Dare I say it is God's plan for human beings to know that they are all the beloved children of God. And God used Paul, murderous, bull-headed, arrogant, PAUL, as the mouthpiece to say it. It is never too late to share these kinds of words of love with another person to help them recognize who they really are as heirs of this promise.

How do we do that? It's simple really. You might find your own language but here are some sentences from the starter kit. You can say to another, or to yourself:

You are enough – just as you are.

You are a child of God.

Nothing can separate you from God's love. Nothing.

Whatever words have hurt you, that's not who you are.

It's the powerful nature of second person language, language I have learned from Mister Rogers, and a number of spiritual leaders I have grown to admire. It comes from dropping the labels and seeing the beating heart of Christ in each person whom we meet. It starts with not an us or a them, but a "you." You matter. You belong. You are my neighbor. You are my friend. You are special. Of course, it is the you – language that can be the most destructive as well. You are ugly. You are an irredeemable sinner. You are garbage. It's tricky that way. What has the most power to heal, also has the most power to hurt. So whenever you start a sentence with "you" – be mindful of whatever is going to come out on the other end of that subject. The monk in the story taught his samurai pupil by engaging the power of seeing another face to face. Paul does the same. You, Galatians, are not the labels you think you are, Jew, Greek, slave, free, male, female. I'm going to give you new labels: children of God, clothed in Christ, offspring of Abraham, heirs of the promise. That changes things. That always changes things.

You. You my beloved people of Ashland Presbyterian Church, hear Paul's words and embrace them as the truth about you as well. You are children of God, robed beautifully in the holy nature of Christ, descended from the matriarchs and patriarchs who felt God's presence, and I can guarantee that you have inherited the very same promises – of life that is meant to be abundant and eternal. You are loved by God. Amen.