

**November 19, 2017 (Journey worship)**

**TEXT: Galatians 3:23–29**

**TITLE: Clash of Cultures**

*By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy*

A few years ago, I came to fully understand that unity does not denote and it not dependent on uniformity. Let's face it, we are all different—we come from different family structures and experiences, different economic levels, our educational attainments are varied, the way in which we live and our values are different. And of course we can't ignore the obvious we are racially and ethnically different in many ways. Unfortunately, we allow our differences to keep us from valuing others, seeing the spirit of God operating in others, from realizing that in Christ Jesus, we are one.

I recently discovered a 4 part series on TNT, hosted by Charles Barkley entitled: *American Race*. In the series, Charles traveled to Baltimore to examine the history behind the racial disparities that exist there, the contentious relationship between police and the Black community and police brutality that has resulted all too frequently in the death of Black men and youth at the hands of police officers. Charles traveled to Dallas and met people of the Muslim faith who live in fear as the rhetoric equating their faith with terrorism grows louder and more insidious. While in Los Angeles, Charles met men of Asian descent who expressed Asians are almost invisible, as we continue to see racism as a binary event in the United States. Charles also engaged in an extremely uncomfortable conversation with Richard Spencer, a white nationalist and self-proclaimed leader of "alt-right," one of the many groups that aim to preserve white supremacy in the USA.

In my estimation, the series *American Race* is a microcosm of the dysfunction that has always existed in our country, but has now come out of the shadows. Now, it is socially acceptable to espouse an "us versus them" oratory and to embrace the belief that those who are different are less deserving; or to acknowledge everyone as equal, created in the image and a beloved member of God's family in some way diminishes and cheapens my worth, my personhood.

Since the invasion of Europeans, America has never been a beloved community for people who weren't members of what became the majority race. Schools didn't teach the truth about the atrocities upon which "the land of the free and the home of the brave" was established. Most of us believed the first Thanksgiving was a jovial affair where the new arrivals sat down and broke bread with indigenous people, and all was right with the world. One historian asserts that what has been come to be known as the first Thanksgiving began as a clash of two cultures, with Chief Massasoit arriving with 90 warriors to intimidate the pilgrims, who responded with a show of force. Eventually, this display of power from both sides ended peacefully and the harvest celebration began.

A clash of cultures is what Paul addresses in his letter to the Greek Christians in Galatia as he reminds them that their salvation was solely the result of God's grace, Christ's faithfulness, sacrificial death on the cross and resurrection. The Galatians were

inaccurately being taught by Jewish Christian teachers that to be followers of Christ, acceptable to God, they had to adopt Torah, including males among them submitting to circumcision. The Jewish Christians believed that Gentiles or Greeks had to become like Jews, God's chosen and people of the promise, if in fact they were to be included in God's covenant.

Paul very eloquently wove a theological exegesis explaining it was always God's intent to include the Gentiles in the promised covenant between Abraham, his seed, Jesus and their descendants; the Law was fulfilled by the coming of Jesus; and to continue to operate under the law cheapened the sacrifice made by Jesus, would negate God's grace and denote that the followers of God were not free, but still in need of a custodian, a guardian.

We may never know the motivation in the hearts of the Jewish followers of Christ—whether they were attempting to exclude those they deemed not worthy to be a part of this new expression of faith; whether they honestly believed it was still necessary to follow the Law to be included in God's covenant, in spite of the fact that no one could keep the Law in its entirety, therefore the Law would never result in full inclusion in the promises of God, only God's grace could achieve that. Perhaps, the Jewish Christians were simply afraid that others would usurp what they believed as solely theirs, a covenant relationship with God based on their ethnicity and heritage.

Even today, some believe that to open our borders, which by the way have always been open, to people of Latino descent or the Muslim faith is to make ourselves vulnerable, unsafe, or to cheapen the heritage of what it means to be an American. With the exception of the Indigenous, America has always been a group of people coming from somewhere else either by choice or by enslavement. If we check the record, it was the enslaved, the marginalized, the ones who were deemed as less than who built this country by the sweat of their brow, the work of their hands and the back breaking toil that many others would not do and that remains true today. It's disgraceful when some who have been the recipient of others' sacrifice, shout their "kind" isn't welcome here; go home; or perpetrate unjust and unequal laws and regulations on groups of people they consider expendable, less than or not of their status and stature.

Paul passionately explained to the Galatians that in Christ Jesus there is no Jew or Greek, no slave or free, no male and female, for all are one in Christ; in Baptism we put on Christ, we wear him like a robe, denoting we have taken on a new life, one that is not defined by ethnicity, status or even gender. In Christ Jesus we are equal, unified, heirs of God.

*One commentator writes: "Being in Christ does not do away with Jew or Greek, male or female, even slave or free, but it makes these differences irrelevant before God.... [T]he new unity given in Christ has tremendous social implications. The very fact that the differences no longer matter means that Christians must treat people and groups in this light not only in church on Sunday, but in the total affairs of life, in the so-called secular arena as well as the*

*sacred.” (Cousar, Charles B.; Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Galatians, pg 86)*

It’s a reality that our secular or social circumstances or differences may not change, but what changes for those who are family members of God is how we see and treat one another. Our inclusion in God’s family opens our eyes to see everyone as brothers, sisters, siblings in Christ, regardless of their station in life, their economic standing, their gender identity or orientation, the color of their skin, race or ethnicity; celebrating our differences, united by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.

Commentator Carol Holtz-Martin states: “In the midst of complex immigration controversies, there is neither native born nor illegal immigrant. In a society dramatically divided by income, there is neither moneyed nor working class nor poor. In a society polarized by race, there are neither people of color nor people of no color...there is neither Republican, nor Democrat, nor Independent... And to repeat Paul’s own words: ‘There is *no* male and female, *for* we are all one in Christ.’”

Later today, we will gather around tables in this very room and break bread together as family sharing a pre-Thanksgiving meal. I encourage you to sit with someone you don’t know or wouldn’t ordinarily sit with, talk and get to know one another, ask questions, listen and respond, share experiences, but most importantly see beyond what makes you different and realize that we are all the same—striving to live the best lives we can.

In the Role of the Church in Facing the Nation’s Chief Moral Dilemma in 1957, sixty years ago, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote: “... *the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends. The type of love that I stress here is not eros, a sort of esthetic or romantic love; not philia, a sort of reciprocal love between personal friends; but it is agape which is understanding goodwill for all (men). It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. It is the love of God working in the lives of (men) everyone. This is the love that may well be the salvation of our civilization.*”

In the final episode of American Race, with the exception of Richard Spencer and a Texas group that intimidates Muslims, Charles Barkley brought everyone together he had previously interviewed and engaged—Asians, Blacks, whites, people of Muslim and Protestant faiths, people who had stood as allies with those who had been marginalized and victimized, a family whose son had been killed by the police, an attorney and Black men who organized to stand between those targeted by bigots and racial instigators, people of different economic levels and social strata. They all gathered to talk and reason together as brothers and sisters, siblings; different, yet equal; each supporting the right for the other to exist, to have a place in this world, seeking life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Beloved, together, we will stand or divided we shall fall; we are only as strong as the weakest among us and in Christ Jesus we are unified by his faithfulness, love and God's grace. The only prescription that can eradicate our every broadening distinctions and separation and bring about unity is for us to acknowledge, embrace and celebrate our differences in a respectful, receptive, supportive, loving clash of cultures. Amen