

**July 7, 2019**

**TEXT: Galatians 3:23–29**

**TITLE: Lessons from the Mother Land**

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Many of you know that I recently returned from South Africa, and while I was there, the term “Ubuntu” was repeated frequently by the people I met, and “Ubuntu” was prominent in many of the places I visited; and most especially, the Apartheid Museum, where upon purchasing a ticket to enter, individuals received a designation of white or non-white which indicated the door by which you would enter the museum. I’ll get back to that later. The term “Ubuntu” is a Zulu word that means simply “humanity,” often translated as “I am, because we are,” concern for the well-being of others, or more philosophically, “a belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity.”

It makes sense that Ubuntu is espoused in South Africa, as it has been established that that area is the cradle of humankind; the place where all of humanity first existed, the place where we all, originated as one people, created by God. Even though we all originated from one people, we have allowed our perceived differences separate, denigrate and differentiate us from one another since the beginning of time.

The separation of people was evident even as God designated Israel as God’s chosen people. But lest we get too far ahead of ourselves and point accusatory fingers at God for establishing segregation, we shouldn’t forget that God told Abraham that many nations would descend from him. Thus from the beginning God claimed all of created humanity, and promised that we are all the children of God. The separation and classification of God’s people as being superior or inferior based on location and proximity to whiteness is a social construct, devised by humans to justify the murder of indigenous people all over the world, claiming ownership of land and the riches found therein, and to subjugate one people to another. That was never God’s plan.

As I mentioned earlier, at the Apartheid Museum when you purchase a ticket, you are randomly classified as white or non-white. Those classifications indicate by which door you should enter the museum. I was classified as non-white. I could see people entering the designated white door, but I could not really see what they were experiencing as they walked through the first part of the museum. That’s just like life for some people. They can see other people accessing areas they cannot, but they have no idea what’s really on the other side. What I saw upon entering the non-white side were signs designating where to drink, use the rest room or congregated based on skin color. I saw copies of passes that everyone was required to carry designating their race—black, white, colored, and I saw pictures of blacks being mistreated, harassed, and beaten for infractions that were for the most part based on the color of their skin. And I saw pictures of councils of white men who had the authority to designate the race of a person, thus taking a person’s fate into their hands ultimately determining where they could live, work, their social status, whom they could marry, the list goes on and on. Now you’re probably wondering why a council was necessary, because either you were black, white or somewhere in between, but since so many ethnicities had made their

way to South Africa, either willingly or not, it was possible to petition to be classified as another race. Typically, the deciding factor was based on whether a pencil stuck in your hair would fall out or not. If it fell out you would be considered white or colored. If the pencil remained in your hair, most likely you were classified as black.

The Galatians were having difficulty living into Christianity. The Jewish Christians, who previously lived under the Law of Moses, felt that in order for Gentiles to be faithful members of Christianity, they should observe Torah. Thus the discussion earlier in the chapter about whether the male Gentile Christians were to be circumcised. However, Paul insisted that the new age of faithfulness has dawned as a result of Jesus' faithfulness in his life, death and resurrection. One commentator states, "God's law may have guided the people of faith through the age preceding Christ's arrival, but it is now only through faith in the risen crucified Christ that one becomes rightly related to God, and to other persons in the manner God intended from the time of Abraham." (Robert A. Bryant, *Feasting on the Word, Galatians 3:23–29, Theological Perspective*) Paul admonishes the Galatians that "in Christ Jesus there is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for we are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28)." Now, lest we get it twisted, Paul was not saying that our differences no longer exist, for we are all wonderfully created by God as individuals. Being Christian does not mean that our individual distinctions disappear. Our distinctions continue, but have no determinant importance as it relates to faith.

The European colonizers of South Africa, North, Central and South America, and the Caribbean, and Asia, and almost every other land where the indigenous people had non-white skin, thought it their God-ordained responsibility to tame, educate, overpower, and bring salvation to the people they encountered. Salvation was one of the major reasons lifted up to justify the devastation of African traditions, principles, culture, and customs, every aspect of the indigenous African's established way of life, including worship. Many an injustice has been done to people in the name of God—particularly when one culture decides they define how and what it means to be Christian. Many have been led astray by others imposing their belief, their worship, and their way of being Christian on others. But by doing so, one group holds their culture, their beliefs, their skin-color as the standard by which all others are adjudicated. Paul makes it clear to the Galatians, and to us, that unity does not mean uniformity.

The law of Apartheid was abolished in the 1990's in South Africa. Thanks be to God. Yet, the consequences and inequalities of Apartheid are still very evident today. Persons of African descent are no longer designated to live in particular places, or to work certain jobs or have different career paths. Education and health care is available to everyone. However, black South Africans still lag behind others in educational, job, and career opportunities, affordable housing options and healthcare. Compared to the average Afrikaner and persons formerly designated as colored, some black South Africans are still living in shack constructed of boards and tin, many more are homeless. Black South Africans still experience income insufficiency in greater numbers than any other ethnicities. Black South Africans still suffer sickness and disease, including HIV/AIDS at greater levels than any other group. Income insufficiency is a daily reality,

and many sell their wares on the streets of Pretoria and other cities just to get by. The areas where whites fled after the abolishment of Apartheid are primarily segregated, opulent by comparison and have all the amenities you would expect a home in this day and age to have, electricity, running water, a sewer system.

The poverty and inequalities I witnessed in South Africa may appear to be greater and more devastating than what occurs in America. However, there are people, right here in Pittsburgh who don't have affordable, accessible housing, adequate resources or the ability to acquire or access nutritious food. Right here in Pittsburgh, one third of the population lives below the poverty, defined as a family of four subsisting on \$50,000 or less annually. In Christ Jesus, we are one, there is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male and female. And yet, the distinctions between the haves and the have nots, the impoverished and the affluent, the educated and the un- or undereducated, the rich and the poor, the sick and the well is just as evident in Pittsburgh and South Africa as ever before.

I learned in the South Africa that we all descended from the cradle of humanity, the Motherland, and despite that people of color have been, and in some cases continue to be, deemed as other, considered not being created in the image of God, outside the arc of God's saving grace and safety, and considered less than, to be dominated, and made to emulate and imitate the invading group. I learned that even with the abolishment of colonization, slavery, and Apartheid inequalities still exist. And I also learned that despite the segregation, sin-sickness and inequities that exist in the world, God is still faithful. I learned in the Motherland that people who were formerly enslaved, disenfranchised, segregated, stripped of culture, and identity still acknowledge the God of their salvation, still have hope, dreams and aspirations, still work for a better life for their children, still believe that there's more to life than what they currently experience and see. I learned that there is abundant faith joy and peace residing in shanties and shacks, the townships and settlements inhabited by so many people of color in South African. And I learned that the more I learn there's much more to learn. I also learned in the Motherland that with the dawning of each new day I can trust God to make all things new, and commissions us through our faithful and collective efforts to realize Ubuntu, the principle of "I am, because we are." My few days in the Motherland increased my faith, and taught me to continue to pray, hope and work for a day when everyone is recognized as one people created, loved, claimed and cherished by God.

Amen.