

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Rooted and Grounded in Love: Sticking Out”
Rev. Amy Morgan
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Psalm 19

Galatians 3:19-29

There was only a small gap between us. Maybe four feet. But it might as well have been a hundred miles. Nobody was crossing that line.

On one side stood my church youth group, a bunch of white teenagers from the Texas Hill Country. We'd come to the Presbyterian Pan American School, located just about a hundred miles from the Mexican border, to scrape and paint some of the dormitories. Just after we'd arrived, the students of the school, who were at that time primarily from Mexico and Central and South America, were brought out en masse to meet us.

While their classes were bilingual, many of the students spoke only rudimentary English. And while some of us were taking Spanish classes at school, we were far from conversant.

So across this gap, we had nothing to say, no way to introduce ourselves, talk about shared interests, and learn about each other.

Even if we could have found a way to communicate, I don't know if we would have. Growing up in Texas, we had seen plenty of people from Mexico. I had friends at school from Columbia and Bolivia. But to see this concentrated mass of brown-skinned students, neatly dressed in their school uniforms, was an unfamiliar sight, at the very least. There were more students than church kids. We were in the minority, a position most of us had never experienced before. And we had no idea what to do about it.

So we stood there and stared at each other for what seemed like an eternity until we were invited into the cafeteria for dinner.

As we moved toward the prospect of food, a shared meal, it started to dawn on me that there was at least one thing we all had in common. We were hungry teenagers. And we had just completed a unit on food in my Spanish class. I moved toward the edge of the gap and caught the eye of one of the boys from the school. “Hola,” I said. “Hola,” he replied.

I asked him if the food was good.

He looked shocked at my construction of a complete sentence in Spanish. “Hablas Espanol?” I told him I spoke a little Spanish. He and his friends swarmed me and began talking all at once at the warp speed of teenage conversation. I didn't understand most of what they said, but I had crossed the gap.

For the rest of our week at the school, my new Spanish-speaking friends helped me improve my language skills. They helped me read the Bible and hymns in Spanish during our shared worship services. And all I

had to do was stick out, allow myself to be the one white girl speaking broken Spanish in a group of Latino teenagers.

The world of the early church was defined by impassable chasms like the one I faced upon arrival at the Pan American School. The Roman Empire attempted to keep the peace between a multitude of conquered peoples by establishing clear distinctions between citizens and slaves, developing a unique cultural identity, and reinforcing the hierarchy of household power structures. In this context, Paul's statement on the deconstruction of distinction between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, is not to be taken lightly. Nor would it have made him popular with the Roman authorities. To be proclaiming unity in anything other than Rome would have amounted to treason. But here is Paul, telling the Galatians that they are one in Christ Jesus.

Now, this in no way magically dispensed with all of the dividing walls that existed in first-century Galatia. Paul was not advising that Jews and Greeks find some middle ground where they could all meet up on questions of theology and culture. The concern about the Jewish Law that is the main thesis of this letter maintains that Jews should be Jews and Greeks should be Greeks. As in other letters from Paul, he does not advise that all slaves should be freed so that slave and free are one and the same. And while, of course, there would not have been the possibility of altering the sexes physiologically in Paul's time, he also doesn't advocate for a radical reformation of domestic life to blend the roles of the sexes.

There is still a gap. With Jews on one side and Greeks on the other. With slaves on one side and free people on the other. With men on one side and women on the other.

What Paul is saying is that in baptism, we are given the same uniform, we have "clothed ourselves with Christ." More importantly, we have been given the same promise, the promise given to Abraham, the promise of blessing through Abraham's offspring.

Like teenagers discovering we all gotta eat, discovering that we have at least something in common in the midst of all our differences, God's people can connect and find unity in Jesus Christ. We can recognize one another as heirs of the same promise.

But in order to live into that unity, we will sometimes have to risk sticking out.

And that's tough, because I know some of us come to church to blend in. We want to scoot in the back pew during the first hymn, after that awkward part where everybody shakes hands and hugs and kisses each other. And we want to slip back out during the last hymn, before the pastor gets to the door to ask us how we're doing.

Or we want to blend into a church that agrees with our theology, and maybe even our politics. We don't want questions that make us consider another viewpoint or interpretations of scripture that challenge us to change how we think or how we live. Church is supposed to be a place of comfort and support on our spiritual journey, a sanctuary of like-minded people who will reinforce our deeply-held beliefs.

Maybe we even want to blend in to a church where people look and speak and act the way we do. We all like to believe we are color blind and in love with diversity. But walking into church is oftentimes no different

than walking into the high school lunch room. You gravitate toward what makes you comfortable. You do everything you can to not stick out.

But Paul tells us that our unity in Christ is all about sticking out. It's about being the one Jew in a group of Greeks, the one free person among slaves, the sole female on a team of men. Feeling the strangeness of being in the minority, of being the "other," opens us up to the expansiveness of God's promise, of God's grace, of God's love for all humankind.

While this may be an unusual experience for many of us, there are some of us for whom this feeling is not at all uncommon. So many people here in our congregation and our community feel the friction of sticking out on a daily basis. And our challenge when we are in the majority is to not attempt to assimilate them.

The root of the problem Paul is addressing in his letter to the Galatians is exactly this. The majority of Christians at the time were Jewish. They kept Jewish law, and in order to be fully incorporated into the Jewish community and into the Jewish promise, you had to undergo circumcision.

When non-Jews, mostly Greeks in this region, were called to follow Jesus Christ, they stuck out among the law-following Jewish Christians. And so the easy answer was to help them blend in. They could be circumcised and keep the law, and all would be well.

But that misses the point of both the law and the Jesus event.

The law, Paul says, was meant to be a guardian of sorts, boundaries and guidelines to keep sin contained until Christ came along to deal with sin head-on. Trusting that Christ did what he came to do means that we don't need to trust in the law anymore to keep us in bounds. There's nothing wrong with following the law per se. The Psalmist proclaims that The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. John Calvin believed the law served three purposes: to reflect God's holiness and human sinfulness; to restrain sin to some degree until God's redemption of creation is complete; and to reveal God's desire for our lives.

But the Galatian Christians were attempting to use the law as a form of assimilation, which only served to highlight their distinctions and sanctify their differences.

My freshman year of college, I was invited to go to a show with a group of students from my acting class. I had exactly one friend at the time, who was also in this class. So we planned to meet up in her room and go to the theatre together. I put on what I thought was an awesome outfit for a night at the theatre in New York City. When I arrived at my friend's place, her jaw dropped when she opened the door, and she yanked me inside. She began pointing out everything about my appearance that would make me stick out – in all the wrong ways- in this group. She gave me a new outfit and accessories, did my make-up and hair, and only then would she be seen in public with me. I'm sure I looked awesome. I certainly blended in. But I didn't feel like myself. And I certainly didn't feel like the person I was, the person who showed up at my friend's door, was acceptable and valuable.

And that is why Paul is so adamant about reliance on Christ and the promises of God rather than the provisions of the Law. Because the law can only highlight what is wrong, how we don't fit in. As Paul says, "if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law." But the law can only show us how sinful we are, how depraved humanity is, how far off the mark we

are. Sometimes, it's important for us to see these things. But it is always more important to know that the promise of God is true, that God's love is for everyone, regardless of their life circumstances, and that unity in Christ is what brings glory to God.

We don't need to blend in. We need to be different. Male and female. American and Mexican and Syrian. Tall and short. Gay and straight. Black and white. Baptist and Catholic and Pentecostal and Presbyterian.

But in all our differences, we need to recognize that none of them matter before God. We are one in Jesus Christ, heirs to the promises of God. May that great truth give us the courage to stick out, the courage to appreciate our diversity rather than try to assimilate, the courage to cross the gaps and live in the tension that creates so that we may experience the expansiveness of God's love and grace. Amen.