

Oct 3, 2021 – Bonni-Belle Pickard

Galatians 3.28

Summoned by the God who made us – StF 689

In Christ there is no east or west – StF 685ii

Let us build a house – StF 409 (omit vs 3)

==ORDER OF SERVICE==

Call to worship – WW48

The world belongs to the Lord,

The earth and all its people.

How good and how lovely it is

to live together in unity.

Love and faith come together,

Justice and peace join hands.

If the Lord's disciples keep silent,

These stones would shout aloud.

Lord, open our lips,

And our mouths shall proclaim your praise.

Summoned by the God who made us – StF 689

Prayer

Galatians 3.28 video collage

“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.”

Sermon

In Christ there is no east or west – StF 685ii

Prayers from *A Place for All*

Let us build a house – StF 409 (omit vs 3)

Benediction

We like to think that everything was rosy with the first Christians –
The fire and excitement of hearing about and then deciding to follow Jesus –
Who, through his life and resurrection, was able to conquer all obstacles –
Even death!
The power they heard about and connected themselves with
was electrifying and empowering...

We hear the stories of how the early Christians in Acts responded:
Gathering together and establishing new ways of being community together –
Because they knew God cared for them and wanted them to care for each other.
Sharing what they had and setting up systems to care for those whom society had swept aside
Widows and orphans and lepers
The Holy Spirit coming down powerfully on them as they prayed together
Enabling them to speak and sing and dance in new freedom of the Spirit!
Some found themselves able to go out to preach to others,
Convincing them, too, of the new powers they had found –
And even when they encountered opposition
From those who felt threatened or unconvinced by their preaching,
Even when they faced violent opposition –
beatings, stonings, imprisonment, even death –
They still felt God's Spirit surging up within them and giving them the courage
To face anything unafraid!
In fact, the more outside opposition they faced, the stronger they seemed to grow –
Within themselves, within the new community of diversity they were building --
And that new strength of community, the working out of their faith,
attracted others looking in from the outside!
The Church began to grow!

But as the church grew – and became even more diverse, as Jesus' example had encouraged,
it also began to face the challenges that diversity poses,
Because, from the outset of human society, we've struggled with accommodating difference.
It's easier if everyone does things the same way.
But from the very beginning of creation, God seems to have delighted in creating diversity!
And we, the human creations, are no exception to this rule.
As we learn more and more about the natural world,
We learn that many diverse contributions are needed
in order for all the diverse needs to be met.
So, yes, we know diversity is important –
But sometimes it's very hard to accommodate!

Most of us know a bit about how to act when diversity is first encountered,
Most of us know how to be polite; how to observe and not make too many demands.
But then the newness wears off... and irritation sets in...
And we all know that sometimes it's easier to get on politely with strangers
Than it is to get on with members of your own family!
We have to learn to accommodate different ways of doing things, different perspectives,
And conflict emerges: Who's right? Who's wrong?
Can we both be right? Can we both be wrong?
This whole business of negotiating the space between ourselves takes enormous effort –
But conflict resolution is one of most essential tasks we humans can undertake.

Churches are not immune to this.

When I am assigned to a new church
and find myself approaching the first time communion service,
I usually ask the stewards how communion is done –
And the response invariably is ‘the traditional way’ –
To which I ask, ‘whose tradition?’

Each social group will have decided at some point what *its* traditions and customs are --
And we grow comfortable with these ways of doing --
And to keep doing it that way makes life simpler
Because it requires less decision-making.
So we discourage members of our community from doing things differently –
It works this way best – do it this way, and we’ll all be happy.
And then it becomes a matter of expediency....
And then a matter of necessity.
If you do it differently, we’ll have to expel you.

Often in our move towards expediency, we begin to assign labels to each job, each person;
That one’s a worker, that’s a thinker, that’s a leader, that’s a follower...

If a replacement is needed, we know what to look for:
If your father was a leader, you must be a leader as well
If your mother was a follower, you must follow, too.

But if, heaven forbid!, you have come from some other tribe,
We must keep you separated a bit.

At least until we can figure out your habits and how they differ from ours.
Perhaps its better if you just learn our ways first
And, of course, since you’ll be a learner,
You won’t be as valuable to the community,
So you’ll have a lesser status...

There! Now don’t we all feel better knowing our place?!

Except that for the early Christian community, Jesus had turned all that on its head.

He broke all the rules

About how could lead and who could follow.

About who could eat or talk with whom.

He questioned those who had spent their lifetimes learning the rules

The correct ways of doing things

Like where or how one should pray

Like who could lead the worship –

He even took a child in his lap and said the *child* knew everything
that was important about the kingdom of heaven!

He brought potential disaster upon the whole community

By interacting with people with demons and sickness and open sores.

He brought scandal upon the community

By engaging women in intelligent conversation.

And then he encouraged his followers to do the same, saying
‘this is how God’s community is built and made strong.’

So they gave it a good try –

But it was really hard to figure out which of the old rules to follow –
And which could be ignored.

Rules about which food to eat, about whether their males needed to be circumcised,
About whose widows needed the most protection
(because, of course, widows no longer had husbands,
So their whole existence was literally in question)
About who should or could be whose slave
Or whether anyone should be a slave at all...
About whether Jewish wisdom or Greek philosophy had the fullest answers to life.

The scripture we heard today comes from Paul's letter to the Galatians.
Ancient Galatia was one of those melting-pot communities in Asia Minor –
On a crossroads where all sorts of people encountered each other's difference;
Where they were probably happy enough to see different styles of dress in the market
And to hear different tongues being spoken,
Perhaps even to recognise different ways people walked or carried themselves..
And they might have even been brave enough to invite some of them
To come and experience worship with them,
Which meant the new ones began to experience some of that community
that they heard the disciples talking about...
But after a while, it got a bit difficult.
And some of the newcomers didn't really understand the customs they'd developed.
And some of the established ones didn't really understand
Why they should allow folks to disregard the rules...

Paul, himself, was well accustomed to the struggle himself –
Indeed, he struggled himself to accommodate what he'd learned as a good Jew
And what Jesus taught about all sorts of customs and regulations –
He'd learned, through following Jesus, that God loved the Gentiles as well as the Jews
And that circumcision of 'the heart'
was more important than what was done to the genitals.
He knew that women were to be valued not just as wives and mothers
But as church leaders and preachers and teachers,
And he did indeed work with many whose ministry he admired greatly...
But sometimes it just was hard to reconcile all he'd been taught...
Paul had been taught to be wary of those who were different
And it was taking another lifetime of learning
to unlearn all those lessons of exclusion.

Two thousand years later, we're still trying to learn these lessons.
Each time there's a perceived threat to our survival,
We're quick to look around to see who is to blame – who's not doing things right.
Those who look or act differently are the first to be suspected.
We lock our doors – and the windows.
We secure the gates; we close the borders.
We try to determine who's safe to let in and who's not
Often by what they look like or what their name sounds like.
We remind ourselves that we're just doing it for our own safety
And that we've had to work hard to learn how to survive,
So if the others are struggling, perhaps they just haven't learned their lessons yet.
We can let them in later, when things have calmed down,
When they've learned how to be like us.

In the meantime, we've lost the opportunity to learn what parts of who they are
Resounds with who we think we are.
We lose the opportunity to find new ways of being our fuller selves,
To explore what they bring 'of Christ' to expand our own essence of being 'in Christ.'

I worked with two congregations in a previous circuit that shared a single building.
They shared a single commitment to the Christian faith,
But they literally spoke different languages.
And despite all the best intentions of each group,
They eventually found it very hard to really be 'one' in their faith.
The English-speaking hosts were quite proud to welcome in the others,
To generously provide space for the other.
But when the other group had more small children
Whose balls seem to bounce against light bulbs occasionally,
Rules had to be enforced about where one could play...
And though many enjoyed the feasts at the church when different food was prepared,
There were comments afterwards about the lingering 'smell' in the kitchen.
And when occasional joint services were planned,
A few 'special numbers' of music from the 'others' were added in,
But most of the service was still in English
With only one English-speaking person attempted to learn the 'other' language.
The sharing agreement eventually ended, with hurt feelings on both sides.

I could tell you many more stories,
And indeed you could probably tell me some of your own:
How even those who all spoke English were of different age groups -- or social classes --
So they struggled to meaningful ways to mingle together.
How men have been excluded from teaching the little ones
Or women have been excluded from leading.
How a preacher in a wheelchair or even with a walking frame
Found it impossible to get to the pulpit.
How a young mother with a baby in a pram discovered steps and doorframes at the church
Too difficult to navigate.

This past summer, our current President of Conference was telling the story
Of how her aunt in the 1960s -- then newly arrived from the Caribbean --
was explicitly told that she couldn't worship at the local Methodist Church.
We know stories of how some gay and lesbian and trans persons have been excluded,
Some even viciously attacked for daring to believe they too would be welcome.
Thankfully, many of these situations from the past have been rectified,
But new ones keep cropping up.
I have a theory that God's diversity of creation is so great,
That we'll never run out of new things to encounter!
Which means we all are continually finding we need to unlearn what we thought we knew
About who to include and who to exclude -- and why.
Our overall social need to conform in order to be accepted is so strong,
That it can take generations for further levels of diversity to be expressed --
Even longer to be recognized and accepted.

These past few years have seen a new world-wide reckoning with movements such as BlackLivesMatter and the #MeToo campaign.
If it suddenly seems like everywhere you turn
Folks talking about sexual exploitation or racial or gender injustice,
And meeting transgendered folk is becoming much more common –
Even in our churches, where it seemed for a long time
That everyone else was ‘just like us.’
So now we feel a new urge to talk about ‘us’ and ‘them’ again –
Just like the Galatians were doing in Paul’s time.
And Paul’s response continues to echo through the centuries:
“You are all one in Christ Jesus.”

And we are confronted with thinking again...
And with finding new words to describe what we’re learning.
For several decades, we’ve been wrestling in the church
With the practice of calling God ‘Father’ or ‘King’ or ‘Lord’ –
Each of these titles that, perhaps innocently enough,
Were used to indicate the highest position of God in human terms –
Especially when male was considered the highest position in society
And Kings ruled and Lords lorded it over all...
But make less sense for those whose experiences with abuse
Have made these titles threatening rather than accessible.
We’ve worked through decades of trying to use more inclusive language for people –
recognizing that at least half of humanity is excluded when ‘he’ is the norm.
Martin Smith and I have recognized that some of the wording has been changed
In the hymns I’d chosen today –
Singing the Faith has deliberately omitted the word ‘brother’
When speaking of humanity in general.
At Conference last summer, President Sonia Hicks went a step further.
She started her statements with the greeting: “Siblings in Christ.”
Sonia had been listening hard to persons who struggle to understand themselves
As male or female – so neither a ‘sister’ nor a ‘brother’...
In which case, the usual greeting, ‘Brothers and Sisters in Christ’,
Just left them excluded.
So, Sonia used ‘Siblings in Christ.’
It took me a while to think it through.
It made me think of my biological sisters and my brother –
And what I’m saying when I call others ‘sisters and brothers in Christ.’
It made me appreciate again what I’m saying about our relationship together.
It made me wonder if I was really ready to call members of my congregation
My ‘siblings’.
I still stumble over ‘Siblings in Christ’ a bit – but I’m trying.

I try to think how Paul might phrase his comment to us today:
Would he say: “There is no longer English or Scottish or American or foreigner;
There is no longer Black or White or Brown or Mixed-Race;
There is no longer Male or Female or Gay or Straight or Trans or Queer”?
I hear myself saying, “but it’s important that our differences are noted!
We’re each special!” Well, yes, but that’s another sermon...
Perhaps I’ve missed the essential point: “You are all One in Christ Jesus.” Amen.

Prayers from A Place for All, Prayer Handbook, 21-22

It's so easy, Lord, to behave in a way that isn't welcoming.
To only want people like us:
Those who talk like us, think like us and act like us.
It's hard to welcome those who behave in strange ways,
Those who challenge our preconceived ideas
And those we struggle to like.
Yet you call us to love all.
Forgive us for the times we have been unwelcoming,
For the times we haven't loved,
And for the times we have turned your children away.
Forgive us, for just as those who we have turned away
Need the good news of your radical love,
So do we. In the name of Christ. Amen. (James Blackhall)

I'm old, walk slowly, beard white, trainers grey.
I'm tall, speak loudly, hair long, boots black.
I'm smart, self-reliant, skin olive, sandals brown.
I'm gay, well off, eyes green, brogues smart.
I'm thin, unemployed, hands weak, shoes worn.
I'm overweight, bake bread, feet large, clogs red.
We're different.
Different genders, ethnicities, ages, abilities, lifestyles, ideas.
Different skills, talents, backgrounds, experiences, views,
But we love one another.
We've found a place we cherish.
It's called Church.
Thank you, God. Amen. (Ann Cooper)

Loving God, in our churches we seek to make all welcome
But that can be a hard thing to do.
We struggle to extend our welcome
to people we consider to be smelly and unwashed,
To those we think are too loud,
O those who live with mental health conditions,
And to those who are just different from 'us'.
Be with us as we try to do better. Amen. (Hilary Evans)

Loving, living God, forgive us when we say, "All are welcome!"
And mean those who are like us.
Help us humbly to live out the words we say
And value the gifts that others bring.
When we struggle to listen to voices other than our own,
Unstop our ears to hear unfamiliar music;
And may we respect one another,
Removing barriers, allowing every one to have a place.
Lord Jesus, in your compassion you responded to the voiceless.
In your name, grant us that same compassion and openness. Amen. (Paul Davis)

Summoned by the God who made us
Rich in our diversity,
Gathered in the name of Jesus,
Richer still in unity.

*Let us bring the gifts that differ
And, in splendid, varied ways,
Sing a new Church into being
One in faith and love and praise.*

Radiant risen from the water,
Robed in holiness and light,
Male and female in God's image,
Male and female, God's delight.

Trust the goodness of creation;
Trust the Spirit strong within,
Dare to dream the vision promised
Sprung from seed of what has been.

Bring the hopes of every nation;
Bring the art of every race.
Weave a song of peace and justice;
Let it sound through time and space.

Draw together at one table
All the human family;
Shape a circle ever wider
And a people ever free.

- Delores Dufner

In Christ there is no east or west,
In him no south or north,
But one great fellowship of love
throughout the whole wide earth.

In him shall true hearts eerywhere
Their high communion find;
His service is the golden cord
Close-binding humankind.

Join hands then all the human race,
Whate'er your nation be;
All children of the living God
are surely kin to me.

In Christ now meet both east and west,
In him meet south and north;
All Christlike souls are one in him
Throughout the whole wide earth.

■ John Oxenham

All Are Welcome

Let us build a house where love can dwell
And all can safely live,
A place where saints and children tell
How hearts learn to forgive.
Built of hopes and dreams and visions,
Rock of faith and vault of grace;
Here the love of Christ shall end divisions;

*All are welcome,
All are welcome,
All are welcome in this place.*

Let us build a house where prophets speak,
And words are strong and true,
Where all God's children dare to seek
to dream God's reign anew.
Here the cross shall stand as witness
And as symbol of God's grace;
Here as one we claim the faith of Jesus;

*All are welcome,
All are welcome,
All are welcome in this place.*

Let us build a house where hands will reach
Beyond the wood and stone
To heal and strengthen, serve and teach
And live the Word they've known.
Here the outcast and the stranger
Bear the image of God's face;
Let us bring an end to fear and danger

*All are welcome,
All are welcome,
All are welcome in this place.*

Let us build a house where all are named,
Their songs and visions heard
And love and treasured, taught and claimed
As words within the Word.
Built of tears and cries and laughter,
Prayers of faith and songs of grace,
Let this house proclaim from floor to rafter:

*All are welcome,
All are welcome,
All are welcome in this place.*

--Marty Haugen