

“US AND THEM”
A Sermon Preached at
FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Belleville, IL
By The Rev. Alex Lysdahl
(transcribed from audio file)

Our first scripture reading this morning comes from Galatians 3:23-29.

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

Our second reading is from Hebrews 13:1-2.

Let mutual affection continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. NRSVue

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I want you to pretend that you are going to run for a public office. You can pick the position. Maybe it's Board of Education. Maybe it's Senator or Representative. Some of you are ambitious. Maybe even President. It's okay. Pretend. Pick one.

Now how would you describe yourself in the campaign materials that you would put out. Would you talk about where you grew up? Try and connect with the locals? Would you talk about your educational background? Maybe you have some degrees that you are proud of. What about family connections? Maybe you come from a strong political family. Do you have any accomplishments or work experience that you think would help you get elected. How would you attempt to describe yourself to this community or to the nation if you're trying to run for President. How would

you describe yourself? How would you try and convince them that they should vote for you? Would you say you are a member of First United Presbyterian Church of Belleville? A church going person? Would you say that you are well respected in your field? Maybe you're a person of the people. Right? Or maybe you get things done.

What would you say? How would you describe yourself? What would you use to describe your status in this community, or in our nation?

Now I want you to think of someone you don't like. Perhaps even an enemy, although that is kind of a strong word, but sometimes if the shoe fits. If you can't think of an enemy, what about a co-worker who pushes all of your buttons, or a family member who you really, really, really can't stand and avoid at family gatherings. Think of someone you don't really like and maybe even would cross to the other side of the street if you saw them downtown. Got 'em in your head? Okay.

What if you had to help them get elected for public office? How would you describe them? What type of status do they hold? What type of campaign material would you help craft for them, in a nice way? What type of words would you use to describe them?

Those categories that we use as identities because that is what these categories are that Paul is talking about in his letter to the Galatians. Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. They are categories that either afforded a person's status in that community or didn't afford them status.

It's 2025. What categories do we use to assign status to ourselves and each other? I think a modern-day version of this passage could perhaps say, "As many of you were baptized into Christ, have clothed yourself with Christ, there is no longer Democrat or Republican, blue collar or white collar, straight or gay, unhoused or housed, white or black, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. There are a lot of categories, a lot of diversity, and this congregation has a great deal of diversity. We have people who vote Democrat and Republican. We have white collar workers, blue collar workers, straight people, gay people, unhoused people, people with homes, white people, black people, and the list can go on.

And yet, and yet we are all children of God. We all belong and are claimed as beloved children, heirs even. Those categories, those identities that we claim, don't go away because of Christ, we don't lose our individuality because there is value in diversity, but they don't afford us any particular status in the kingdom of God. They may make up who we are, but they don't determine who we are, because we are God's.

We are all unique special people. We all like to feel unique and special and we are all God's children. The silly thing is we forget that. We think our opinion about other people matters, that we get to judge who is us and who is them, who is in, who is out, who belongs. The audacity! The audacity! Only God gets to do that, and God says we are all one in Christ Jesus. Period.

When I was on sabbatical, I went to different churches, and I didn't plan which churches I would go to ahead of time. I didn't have like a thoughtful road map, I just ended up picking out a church week by week and I noticed a pattern. It wasn't a conscious decision, but I almost exclusively went to churches where I knew someone or I knew at least one person, or I knew people. I went to my parents' church, and I sat with them. I went to my husband's church where I couldn't sit with him because he was up front, but I have friends there that I sat with, and I went to a pastor friend's church in St. Louis. I sat with her family. I went to a friend's Presbyterian church and I sat with him.

There were a few churches that I went to where I didn't know a single person but honestly, I kinda had to psych myself up, give myself a little pep talk before I went. And the experience wasn't as good. It felt different. Having just a little kernel of connection, just a little bit of connection and belonging makes all the difference, all the difference. Because as a pastor, theologically I know I have every right to walk in any church and belong. Right? Child of God. I can go anywhere, but emotionally, emotionally, it's really nice to sit somewhere with someone and feel like I belonged.

So, on that note I'd like to mix things up literally. There are plenty of newer folks in our congregation, new within the last 5 years and there are a lot of you who have been around for a while and there are a lot of you who are looking at the clock. I got you. Don't worry. Hang in there. If you have been here for less than 5 years I'd like you to find someone who has been here longer than 5 years and vice versa. If you cannot get up, just stay where you are. If you can get up, look around and make sure the people who are on their own have a partner and then I'd like you to very quickly find 3 things you have in common and 3 things that are different. And

you are really hard to get back together again so I need to do this quickly and I need you to listen. All right? Ready! Set! Go!

All right. I need you to bring it back together. Find your seats. Conclude your conversation. You all are a chatty crowd. I know that. When we start worship at 10:30 we never start at 10:30 because you all like to chat with each other out in the Commons. So, find your seats. I'm glad you're all best friends now. I know you found a new bestie. That's fantastic. Perhaps now you have someone you can sit with next week or perhaps you feel a little bit more of that idea of belonging and that we are all one in Christ. Cool. All right.

So now your challenge this week is to think of that enemy or that person that you just aren't a big fan of. That person that you would cross to the other side of the street if you saw them downtown. And remember how God sees them. Not by human status, but with love. A love that reaches out to them through Christ and draws them in, into that household of God. Remember how God sees them because our opinion on the matter, it doesn't matter. God's does and we are not God. Thank goodness that we are not God, but God's opinion about others is what truly matters and belonging in Christ is a both/and. It's a love that goes out through Christ and it's a love that not only draws us in, but draws others in as well.

So, as Christ's followers, our love should go out and draw people in with radical hospitality because we may be showing hospitality to angels without even knowing it. Allah Hebrews 13.

Amen? Amen.