

All One: Believe It or Not!

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Galatians 3:23-29

Noted Preacher and New Testament scholar, Fred Craddock, shares this story from his childhood. “When I was growing up on the farm in western Tennessee, our closest neighbor, and good neighbor, was a black family named Graves – John and Jeanetta Graves – just wonderful people. She was the happiest, most loving person I knew. She laughed as though it came from her whole body and had long arms with which she embraced everybody. She became pregnant, had a son, and was pleased to say to the world, ‘This is going to be a child for reconciliation.’ She said this because in western Tennessee in those days there was still a lot of racial prejudice, still a lot of talk about the Civil War. So she said, ‘My child will be a child of reconciliation’ and she named him Lee Grant Graves – Lee Grant...think about that.

“My mother said, ‘That was a mistake Jeanetta. Nobody’s going to like him now.’

But Jeanetta said, ‘No, no, no! He’s going to be the end of all this hostility and hatred. He’s going to be the child of reconciliation.’

I remember going to town with Lee Grant. I have never witnessed one person suffering the verbal abuse that he suffered from people who didn’t even know him. He was a very gracious, good young man, but his name was Lee Grant. One day his mother said to me, ‘I don’t think you should go to town with Lee Grant anymore...you might get hurt.’

Says Craddock, “But I was already hurt...strange.”

Martin Luther King, Jr., once proclaimed that injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere. A young Fred Craddock discovered the truth of those words, but do you believe it?

Minister and author, Frederick Buechner, has written, “Your life and my life flow into each other as wave flows into wave, and unless there is peace and joy and freedom for you, there can be no real peace or joy or freedom for me.” Do you believe that?

There is an ancient story, coming interestingly enough from Jewish sources. It seems that after the Egyptian army was destroyed in the waters of the Red Sea during the exodus, angels in heaven were celebrating: “Did you see that. We really got them – never saw it coming. That will teach them to mess around with our people.” But then God Almighty came by and with a voice both angry and heart-broken, he ordered the angels to be quiet and the celebration to cease. The angels couldn’t understand why – “Look, we got ‘em!” In response all the Almighty could do was shake his head and say, “Did it not occur to you that the Egyptians are also my children?” This is a story told by Jews! All are my children...do you believe that?

Apparently Paul believed it. And so he could tell the often quarreling and divided Galatians, “In Christ Jesus you are all children of God...There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female” (no longer black or white or brown?) “For you are all one in Christ Jesus.” And he could tell the often judgmental and rather arrogant Corinthians: “If one suffers, all suffer together. If one rejoices, all rejoice together?” And why? Because, like it or not, we are all part of the same body. Who can ever forget Dr. King dreaming of that day when every person would be judged, not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. Ah yes, what a day that will be. But it is not yet...not yet.

African-American columnist, Jon Carroll, writing in the San Francisco Chronicle following recent tragic incidents in Ferguson, Staten Island, and elsewhere, said, “Everybody in the African-American community has a “driving while black” story. White people have no such comparable stories. Most black people know someone in jail; most white people don’t. Racism is alive and well; even though it’s no longer the dominant narrative, it continues to thrive... America has tried to change; really, compared with say, 1960, things are better. But better is not the same as good, and the betterness has given lots of people the excuse to opt out.”

His words take me back to words of Martin Luther King, Jr., spoken to the national meeting, the General Synod, of the United Church of Christ in 1965, words in which he challenged the church and church members not to opt out: “We are called to be thermostats that transform and regulate the temperature of society, not thermometers that merely record or register the temperature of majority

opinion. How often the church has had a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds... The time is always right to do what is right." And we could add, the time is never right to turn away and opt out... not while others are struggling and hurting.

Noted preacher and author, Tony Campolo, tells of an experience he had on a trip to an impoverished country: "When I was in Haiti, I was at a restaurant table, ready to eat my meal. I looked to the right and there were three boys. Dirty, with swelled bodies and hair thin and rust-colored from malnutrition, they pressed their noses against the glass, staring at the food on my plate. The waiter, seeing my discomfort, moved in quickly and pulled down the shade. He said to me, 'Don't let that bother you. Enjoy your meal.' Says Campolo, "As if I could. But isn't that what we do? Don't we all pull down the shade?"

And he's right! It's so easy to do. Especially in a place like this - in mostly white, mostly affluent, mostly peaceful Sebastopol, CA and Sonoma County? But, if we take the words of Paul seriously, take the life and teaching of Jesus seriously, we really have no choice. There is no room for retreat. So, rather than pointing fingers, assigning blame or simply turning away... what can we do?

A number of years ago, a colleague here in Northern California spoke these words: "I hurt because I feel we often approach each other with closed fists, holding on for dear life to whatever it is we have and are, therefore, blocked from seeing what the other has to offer.... Clinched fists, closed minds, stuck feet, closed hearts, stereotypes and prejudices keep us locked in – keep us from seeing and perceiving where God might be doing a new thing in our presence... Living in genuine community is one of the toughest of human tasks for it requires this: the ability to open our fists into an outstretched hand, to open ourselves to the reality of another, and to trust enough to share our own hurt and concerns. Warm, fuzzy, good feelings are not enough.

"We must have the courage to ask: can we stand each other enough to tolerate our differences; can we stand each other enough to take each other seriously – to see a face and not a caricature; to hear a voice and not a pre-recorded tape; to listen before denouncing; to feel the hurt behind the anger; to respect one another enough to give love a chance? Can we stand each other enough, can we love each other enough, to ask: what is important to you; why do you value that; where are you hurting; tell me more, I'm not sure I understand?" It's tough, but it happens...it really does.

About a year ago I was involved in a meeting with some Latino representatives of the North Bay Organizing Project, some church folks, and our Police Chief, Jeff Weaver, and one of his officers. We discussed concerns of the Latino community such as ICE hold for minor traffic offenses, what constituted proper ID and Driver's Licenses. There was good discussion, honest give and take, a real effort made by all parties to understand. And in the end, we reached some important agreements. People truly felt heard and listened to. Understanding takes effort, but it is possible.

When a black teenage boy, someone's grandson, goes out on a Saturday night, does he face suspicions and threats that my grandson will never face? Does his grandfather have to give him warnings I will never to give to Ben? How does that feel? When Paul says that we are all one, members one of other he is saying we should ask that question. We should try to reach into the other's heart, try to feel what the other feels, try to understand how the other experiences the world. Again, to attempt to move beyond fears and stereotypes to at least make a sincere effort at understanding.

A final word from Frederick Buechner: "As surely as a sailing ship is made to sail with the wind, so are you and I and everybody else in this world made to live bound to each other as a brother is bound to a brother, giving and receiving mercy, binding up each other's wounds, taking care of each other. If we really look at our lives, seeing not what we expect them to be but what they are, we cannot help seeing that. Nobody can. It need not have been so. It can be imagined otherwise. Yet it is so.

And why? Because we are not separate. Like it or not, we are one, joined together in one body by Christ himself.