

“All Means All”

Galatians 3: 23-29

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Perhaps you’ve experienced this:

A friend or relative of yours goes on vacation to, let’s say, England, and when they come home you notice that they are speaking with just the slightest English accent. No doubt you think, “Yes, we all know that you’ve been to Jolly Ole’ England on your holiday. Not need to rub it in our faces, what?”

Or maybe your friend went to Cancun to one of those all-inclusive getaways and the come back talking with just a tinge of Spanish in their accent. And you think, “Jes, we all know where Jou haff bing. Jew don nee to cho off wid jour agcen.”

Maybe you’ve noticed it in yourself. You spend some time visiting friends in Georgia and you start talking like a southerner, saying y’all, and y’hear and things like that. It doesn’t even take a long time for some people. They sit in a meeting with someone who stutters and within minutes they find themselves stuttering.

Linguists are people who study language and how language works in culture and while I’m not a linguist, you don’t spend as much of your life as I do, working with words, without linguistics becoming at least something of a hobby, an avocation, or at least an interest.

And I have discovered that linguists know all about this proclivity some people have for talking like the people around them. They have even given it a name. Linguists call it “linguistic accommodation,” and it happens in about 60 – 70% of the population and it is not a voluntary activity. Most of the people who do it can’t help themselves.

It turns out that there is, in the human brain, a deep seeded need to be accepted and included by the group of people in which we find ourselves and, in some people, that need takes up residence in the area of the brain that controls speech and communication. When they are around people who speak differently from them, they involuntary accommodate their speech patterns to the speech patterns of those they are with. Young people call it “code switching.”

The human desire, the need to be included, is so strong that our brains will automatically adjust our speech patterns to remove communication barriers that might have kept us on the outside looking in.

TO BE INCLUDED

Probably the most painful and perverse practices ever foisted on children is that of choosing sides for a sports activity. I have shared with my kids and grandkids my experiences as a junior high student who had not matured physically as quickly as some of my peers. Well, the humiliations of that experience were nowhere more painful than on the playground or in the gym when it came time to choose sides.

How I hated those minutes before the start of a softball game, minutes that stretched like hours as the two team captains called out the names of those whom they wanted on their teams always leaving tall, skinny, clumsy Dean to the bottom of the list. How I longed for that day, which I feared would never come, when I was strong and coordinated and fast and was picked among the first or (dare I dream it?) was the one doing the picking.

And oh, how I loved Mr. Schultz, the varsity basketball coach and gym teacher. He, of all people, had that sensitivity that uncoordinated, unpopular kids so long for in a teacher. By the time he was my teacher I was playing on the J.V. football, basketball and track teams and was often one of those who would have been doing the picking, but I admired him because he sometimes made the least talented kids the captains of the teams. And, often, it was he who decided who would play on which teams.

Perhaps that's why, after I was sidelined from sports with a knee injury, I drifted to music and theater.

I already played in the concert band and sang in my church choir with my dad, so I wasn't altogether unfamiliar with the performing arts. Theater was a new experience for me, but I soon learned to love it.

And one of the reasons I loved it, beyond discovering that I had a natural gift, was that the theater department was so inclusive. In sports I hung around with people pretty much like me. Back stage I met kids from different backgrounds with different gifts and interests who had all come together in this one endeavor.

The teamwork I enjoyed in sports was still there in band and choir and theater. The discipline and the sense of achievement that I loved in sports were there in the arts as well.

But more than anything else, there was that sense of inclusiveness. Everyone was welcome in the theater: boys, girls, liberals, conservatives, gays, straights, jocks, nerds, you name it. Our drama director at Sycamore High School made it clear – if you are willing to put in the work and come to rehearsal, if you are willing to try to get along with everyone else and “leave the drama on the stage,” you are welcome here. We will find a place for you to be part of this glorious enterprise.

And, when I became a director myself, I put those same rules into effect: Every day when we did auditions, I would announce to the kids that “I'd rather have someone with a five talent and a ten commitment than someone with a ten talent and a five commitment. Commit to this group and we will commit to you.”

I found that same kind of inclusiveness in the church that I grew up in in Indianapolis, and later, the Church of the Savior UMC in Montgomery, just north of Cincinnati. You didn't have to be good at anything to be welcomed into the church. You didn't have to be pretty or thin or smart or articulate, but neither did those things work against you.

Here was Larry Steele, morbidly obese, huffing and wheezing his way down the aisle, stopping at every unfamiliar face, shaking hands and introducing himself and everyone was

glad to see him.

Here was John Stanley, whose father was killed in Korea and who never got over the grief even in his teens and acted out his rage and pain and disappointment whenever he got the opportunity – yet he was loved and accepted and supported by the members of his church.

Here were Eben and Eunice Finger who, in their forties, finally gave up trying to have a baby and adopted Chris and David, sister and brother. By the time Chris and David were teenagers Eben and Eunice were the age of most of our grandparents, but they still went on the work camps and retreats with us and occasionally, Eben even played touch football.

Rev. Bob and Nancy Sinks stood by their convictions and opposed the war in Vietnam even in the face of withering criticism and insults and hate mail from people in the community but were loved and defended by their church – even by my parents, who disagreed with them.

Over and over again, I experienced it as I grew up. People who loved each other, cared for each other, included each other and me – especially me – for no other reason than that they chose to. And they chose to because Jesus said they should.

Of course, it wasn't always that way in the Christian church.

PAUL AND THE GALATIANS

The Apostle, Paul, was convinced that Christianity should be an inclusive religion. Other early Christians weren't so sure.

See, the first Christians were all Jews, and they believed that other Christians should be Jews, too. Christianity was, they said, a sect, a reformist group within Judaism. So, to be a Christian, you first had to become a Jew.

This meant that you had to convert to Judaism, you had to abide by the Torah, you had to stay ritually clean, you had to obey the kosher dietary laws and, if you were a man, you had to be circumcised. The Torah was not a problem. Eating kosher was not a problem for most gentiles. Washing your hands and eating utensils was not a big deal. Circumcision, on the other hand, was a huge stumbling block.

It was a painful and difficult surgical procedure done without anesthesia and, despite the Jewish cleanliness rites, it was often done in less than safe and antiseptic conditions. Men were understandably reluctant to abide by this condition of acceptance into the church.

As a result, good and faithful men, men who had accepted Jesus Christ as their savior and promised to live according to his teachings were being denied entrance into the church and when they turned and walked sadly away, their entire families went with them.

Paul had another idea. He called it "circumcision of the heart." (Romans 2: 29)

If a person was transformed in their hearts and their minds and that transformation was

reflected in their behavior, especially their behavior toward other people, then that was enough. Were they loving and kind and generous and patient? Did they possess the gifts of the spirit and share those gifts with other Christians? Well, okay, then. They were accepted and they were included in the community of faith.

And, miracle of miracles, he got the church in Jerusalem, the mother church, the home church, the conference office to accept his interpretations and definitions.

The problem, however, as we all know, is that just because the home office declares a thing to be so, doesn't mean that it is actually so in the local churches. The church of Jerusalem had allowed, reluctantly to be sure, but they had allowed that ALL who accepted Jesus Christ were to be included in the church.

All. No exceptions. All means all.

Not everyone agreed, however.

The term, Galatia, refers to the northern region of Asia Minor and the Galatians were a group of people who lived in that area whose ethnic roots were Celtic and gentile. Paul had visited several young churches in that area during his second and third missionary journeys and had found them to be loving, inclusive, nurturing groups, eager to grow in and serve the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Shortly after he left, however, a group of Jewish Christian missionaries came through the area and told everyone that they were doing it completely wrong. They would all, these Jewish Christian missionaries said, have to convert to Judaism and the men would all have to be circumcised or they could not be considered true Christians.

Troubled by this contradiction of what Paul had taught them, the Galatians sent emissaries to Paul with a letter asking him to please explain what was going on.

The letter that we have in the Bible and from which we read our lesson, today – the Letter to the Galatians – is Paul's response to the Celtic, gentile Christians in the several cities in the region known as Galatia, in Asia Minor.

Boiled down to its essence, he says this:

We are saved by God's grace and our faith in that grace is the only response that is required of us.

We are not saved by any act of our own.

We are not saved by the laws of the Torah – even though following them is a good idea.

We are not saved by the Ten Commandments – even though they are good laws.

We are not saved by keeping kosher – even though it's a good way to stay healthy.

We are not saved by washing our hands – even though we should, especially before we return to work.

We are not saved by our politics, our wealth, our education, our achievements, the size of our house, our even how often we got to church.

We are saved by God's grace. And ALL who accept that grace are saved.

All.

Are we clear on the All thing?

THE PROBLEM WITH LITTLE WORDS

Halford Luccock, the Methodist preacher and professor of homiletics at Yale University in the 1950's used to say that the hardest part of any language is not the big words but the little ones. The Galatians, he said, had no problem with a big word like circumcision. It was the little tiny, three letter word that gave them problems: all.

Yes, Paul, they said. We understand that all are saved by grace through faith, but allowances must be made when it comes to their place in the church. Allowances for, say, gender. Surely, you're not saying that women should be included in the church in the same way men are.

Paul's response: All.

Well, yes, of course. But should some provision be made for socio economic differences? I mean people of means just aren't comfortable sitting with the – how shall we say it? -- people of limited means. Probably the poor would be more comfortable with their own kind.

All.

All, of course. But what about ethnic differences? All those different skin colors and nationalities and accents and traditions and...

All.

Politics? Republicans and Democrats and greens and tea partiers and libertarians and socialists and...

All.

Levels of education? Illiterates and Ph.D.'s?

All.

Age? Children, teenagers, middle agers, empty nesters, senior citizens?

All. All. All.

GALATIANS AMONG US

You'd think, would you not, that after saying the word, "All," that many times we would get it? But we do not.

Galatians still live among us. Even in the church. Especially in the church.

There are those who still insist that we are not saved by grace but by theology, that if your theology does not agree with theirs, you will be consigned for eternity to the all-consuming and torturous flames of Hell.

There are those who still insist that if you don't practice the sacrament of baptism as they do you cannot possibly be saved and included in the church of Jesus Christ. There are those who are still convinced that the role of the church is not to welcome the lost but to exclude the unworthy.

There are those who call themselves Christians, followers of Jesus, who insist that the greatest glory of life in the Kingdom of God is looking out at all of those who can't get in because they didn't pray the right prayers, hold the right doctrines, hate the right people, salute the right flag, sing the right hymns, eat the right food, live by the right rules, and agree with the right people. There are those in the Christian family who insist that all doesn't mean all. That all means some and the some means them.

There are, sadly, lots of Christians who have mastered the big words, who are intimately familiar with words like justification and sanctification and Armageddon and eschatology. There are loads of Christians who can identify all the big word heresies from Apollonarianism to Arianism and philosophies from Eudaimonism to Existentialism.

But they still get caught up on little words like peace and joy and faith and hope and, especially, all.

Listen again to the words that we read just a few minutes ago –

“...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 gentile, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female – Democrat or Republican, white or black or brown, gay or straight, young or old, rich or poor, inside or outside – for **ALL** of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ Jesus you are children of Abraham and heirs to God's great promise.”

AMEN