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Galatians 3:23-29
Reformation in Greenland Hills

Rev. Kerry Smith
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Galatians 3:23-29 New Revised Standard Version

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 justified 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.

 When I came to Greenland Hills as the pastor, I was worried about my daughter. My daughter only remembered being a part of one church. We had been at Oak Lawn UMC for five years and that was the church of her childhood, so I didn’t know how she would respond to this new church but I was determined that she would like it. So, after that first Sunday morning I asked her how it was. I knew that whatever she said, I could fix it. If she didn’t like Sunday School, I would find better curriculum. If she was bored in church, I would make my sermons more exciting. I was going to do whatever I could to make church enjoyable for her. Do you know what she said about this place? She said that she didn’t like it. So, I asked her why because I was going to fix it and she said that the sanctuary was too small. She had only known Oak Lawn UMC’s sanctuary with its vaulted ceilings and cavernous feel, so in comparison this sanctuary is small. I could not fix it. This is our sanctuary and it seems pretty perfect to me. I have to add that now my daughter loves her church, Greenland Hills!

 What does sanctuary mean to you? Is it vaulted ceilings and stained glass? Is it prayer and communion and preaching? Is it something else? A sanctuary should be a place where you feel claimed and known and home. A place where you can breathe deeply in the affirmation that you are a beloved child of God. A place where you can let down your mask or your guard and just be. A sanctuary should be a place where you feel safe, no matter what hard or awful thing is happening in your life or in this world.

 October is Domestic Violence Awareness month, which makes me especially mindful that this should be a safe place. In our bathrooms we have domestic violence information and places to call for help. Today is Break the Silence Sunday as Dallas joins with 16 other cities to lift up and pray for an end to domestic violence. As Christians we follow in the footsteps of Jesus of Nazareth and work for the dignity and equality of all people. That means that when someone shares their story of sexual abuse, harassment, assault, violence or more, we believe them. I am a person to whom you can tell your story and I will believe you! I hope that is true of all of us. We will listen without judgement and without condemnation. We will remind victims that it is not their fault and they have done nothing wrong. We can walk alongside someone’s healing journey and help them get support by letting them know about places that can help like Genesis Women’s Shelter. We are all children of God, created in God’s image and we are more than our story.

 In Paul’s words from Galatians we hear about the ideal world that Christ’s love creates. Paul talks about how faith and belonging are what hold us together rather than rigid boundaries and rules of law. In the world transformed by Christ there is “no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male and female.” There is unity for Christians and Jews and all children of God. We have different stories and backgrounds, but we are united. We stand together but what is gone is the divisiveness and hierarchy that oppresses one group to preserve the privilege of another. What is absent is judgment that deems one person or group less valuable, less valid, less worthy of love and embrace; as less human. In the world defined by Christ’s love, we are all beloved children of God, and in God and one another we find belonging, home, affirmation, and safety. We find sanctuary.

 I hope that has been your experience in this church. The tragic truth of our broken world is that many people have not found sanctuary in churches. Instead they have experienced expulsion, rejection, and judgment in churches. The distance between the ideal world and our present world seems so impossibly, devastatingly far apart. We don’t live in a world where the barriers and walls of division, hierarchy, and oppression have been torn down, not even close. We cry out to God wondering where we might find sanctuary from all that is so very broken.

 In just a few short days we will celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation when the world changed. On October 31, 1517, an outspoken university lecturer and Augustinian monk posted a list of 95 objections to the dominant Roman Catholic beliefs and practices of his time. Martin Luther objected to the Catholic teaching that we could attain salvation through our own efforts. He hoped to spark a theological conversation about repentance. Martin Luther argued that salvation was a free gift for all who have faith and who accept God’s grace. That is justification by grace. It is grace rather than good deeds that make salvation possible. Martin Luther believed that people should be able to worship and read the Bible in their own language and we feel Luther’s impact when we read the Bible and we understand it. Luther believed all should be able to share in Communion, not just the clergy.

 Martin Luther emphasized the priesthood of all believers, which means that we participate in worship. We don’t just watch it happen. We sing, we pray, we read the Bible. If you want to understand the Bible or join in a hymn, you need to know how to read, so Protestants built new schools and wrote schoolbooks. Christianity is about being and doing. For us United Methodists, we remember John Wesley, the creator of the Methodist movement, who was reading Martin Luther’s preface to the book of Romans in 1738, more than 200 years after Martin Luther. When Wesley read Luther’s description of the change which God works in our heart through faith in Christ, when he felt his heart strangely warmed and he felt he did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation. Martin Luther unleashed a revolution that transformed Western Europe and eventually the world.

 With 500 hundred years behind us, fellow Protestants, what is your dream for the next 500? Is it less Biblical literalism? That being Christ-like would supplant being “saved” as a way to define Christianity? Is it that the radical work for justice would be in all areas of the Christian Church? A vow never again to side with the powerful against the powerless? Is it to have a church that escapes middle class values? Or that the church would be full of small, transformative communities? That church tribalism would lessen? Or that the good news would include all, not just those who can, or are willing, to fit the mold? Is it more foot-washing and less other-bashing? More food together? Less meetings? More Christ? More hugs?

 We at Greenland Hills United Methodist Church believe in inclusion, equality and love. Grace pervades our understanding of Christian faith and life. Our values say that we think our primary purpose is to live and love as Jesus did which means we are building a world where compassion and justice are the standard of living for all people. We are many people doing lots of things to help God change the world.

 Five years ago the leaders at Greenland Hills wrote these words: At Greenland Hills, we aspire to be disciples who are moving toward being rooted, and living a life of gratitude and joy from the seed of our humanity. Split open by grace through Christ. A life of gratitude. Anchored in life-giving relationships through our inclusive, multi-generational church community. The rhythm of worship. A life of joy. At Greenland Hills, we aspire to be disciples who are moving toward growing, and living a life of perspective and wisdom. Drawn to the truth through careful study of the Scriptures, honest dialogue of prayer, spiritual practices, symbolism, and rituals, wellness of mind and body. A passion for the church, open, informed discourse around the issues of our world. Tempered in the seasons of life through confession and forgiveness, mature handling of conflicts and differences, spiritual guidance and accountability. A life of wisdom. At Greenland Hills, we aspire to be disciples who are moving toward reaching, and living a life of love. Stretching, shading, and bearing fruit through creative expression, vocation and purpose, generosity, service and advocacy for the marginalized. A life of love.

 I remember on my first day as the pastor at Greenland Hills I asked where the security system was. How did we protect the building? How did we keep it locked up and safe? There is no security system! Narcotics Anonymous has been meeting in this place for 18 years and they have 11 meetings a week. Kindermusik uses our space and I love Saturdays at 11 am when the Narcotics Anonymous meeting is happening across the hallway from the Kindermusik class. Tuesday evenings we have Boy Scouts meeting upstairs, Wednesday evenings we have Chancel Choir and then the Singapore Slingers practice. We have folks from the neighborhood who have a regular Wednesday evening walk around this church so they can hear beautiful music emanating from this place. This church is open; this church is a part of its community.

 Our world is crying out for sanctuary, and God is looking at us, Greenland Hills UMC. God calls us to do the work of justice and seek the world of Paul’s dreaming, the world of God’s imagining, the world of Christ’s promise. We may be weary of opening our eyes to all of the brokenness around us and in us, but we go with a promise that God is here, and God is out there, and God is not silent. God has never been silent.

Christ transforms us and transforms the world. Christ breaks down every wall and every barrier that divides us so that we might be held together in one love, the love of God. Our work as a church and as a people is to do the next right thing. We are to carry that promise of God’s love out into this world to each other and to all people. May we share the promise of sanctuary to all who need refuge and safety and home and belonging. Together may we work for a day when that promise of sanctuary encompasses the whole world.

Did you ever sing the song “Sanctuary” at church camp? “Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary pure and holy tried and true. With thanksgiving, I’ll be a living sanctuary for you.” For me it is a song about me being a sanctuary to others, a sanctuary to all people and especially to those who are marginalized or hurting. A sanctuary to all and especially to those who have been led to believe the church cannot be a safe place and home for them.

May God prepare us to be a sanctuary for everyone who needs it. That we might be pure and unhesitating in our love, and holy in our work for justice. That even as we are tired by the hardness that this world sometimes delivers, we would remain true to the promise that we are all one and all beloved by God. That we would give thanks for God’s steadfast love and for our chance to be a part of it, and that we would always be a living, breathing promise of grace and sanctuary for each other and for all. May that be the prayer and promise we carry out from this place. If you know it, will you sing with me? “Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary. Pure and holy, tried and true. With thanksgiving, I’ll be a living, sanctuary for you.” Amen.