

**The Dangers of Exile
Strangers in a Strange Land
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Galatians 2:11-16; 3:26-28**

Central Idea: *Our identity in Christ creates a gospel-based unity that transcends - but does not obliterate - human distinctives. Living out this truth challenges and encourages us to reject tribalism, seek unity within our body, and seek out those who don't yet know Christ.*

I went hoping to make new friends. This was three years ago. Luke was a baby, and Susannah 2. It was the night of their Preschool's open house and there was an optional hot dog dinner ahead of time. Kurt was working late that night, so I'd have to fly solo to the dinner with two small children. Add to that fact that I am not terribly fond of hot dogs, and I did not want to go. But I motivated myself by thinking it would be a good way to connect more with parents. As a working mom, and a mom that is older than most, I felt a great longing to connect. And so, I went. After wrestling the kids through the food line, I turned to look at seating situation. There I was, a baby in one arm, precariously balancing a tray of hot dogs on the other, and a toddler clinging to my leg. I saw a table with a couple of parents, kids, and two empty spots - perfect. I started to ease my tray down and said, "may I join you?"

"No, I'm sorry. These seats are saved."

My heart sank, and my internal voice said, "Everyone has their people. There is no room for another, so I'm not going to try anymore with the parents at preschool." Have you ever had that sinking feeling, that you were excluded from the table; from friendship and community? Farther removed from the situation, I realize that that in the moment, I overreacted emotionally.

These parents weren't excluding me because of something to do with me - at least I trust not - but because they promised an established friend a spot at their table. I'm sure I've done the same thing to others, without any intent to harm. And, yet, being denied a place at the table - a seat in the community - was still a painful experience.

Our text for today is about people being denied a place at the table, literally and figuratively. What was at stake though was more than someone's feelings. What was at stake was heart of the gospel. As we begin our exploration of scripture, let's pray.

We are studying sections of Galatians, starting with chapter 2, verse 1. Before we read, I want to dig into the background. Galatians is called an occasional letter - it was written by a specific person to a specific group for a specific reason. Because of its occasional nature, dropping in in the middle of it without context is like eavesdropping on a stranger who is talking on the phone. Which can be a fascinating, but not transforming. So context, here we come!

Paul penned this letter to the churches in Galatia. He had previously shared the gospel with them on one of his missionary journeys. Though no longer present, Paul heard there was a crisis in the church and he wrote to address it. His response is intense!

The crisis can be summed up with a question: what is the gospel? In the beginning of Galatians, Paul gives a quick summary of the gospel *Jesus Christ gave himself to rescue us* (1:4). A foundational assumption of the gospel is that we need to be rescued.

Our good God created humanity and fashioned the world. God created us to be His people, and God's intention was that we would dwell with God, in His Presence, in the Place He made for us. But our first parents turned away from God, choosing instead to trust in themselves. The result was tragedy: humanity was exiled from our home with God and the

good creation was shattered, splintered by sin, evil, pain, and death. Humanity and creation were left in desperate need of rescue; a rescue we could never accomplish on our own.

Out of love, God chose to rescue us. In the beginning of that rescue plan, God began a special relationship with one people - the Israelites, or the Jews. We read in Scripture that it was God's intention that God would bless all nations through Israel.

One of the ways that God asked the Israelites to relate to Him was through the law; a set of rules governing worship and their life together. Among those laws was the requirement that males be circumcised. The law also included strict rules about what they could and could not eat - some foods rendered them ceremonially unclean (like hot dogs!) and unable to come before God in worship. In practice, this meant that they did not eat with non-Jewish people, called Gentiles, who could pig out - figuratively and literally - on any food. In fact, devout Jewish people didn't associate with Gentiles at all if at all possible.

The purpose of the law is critical in Paul's letter to the Galatians. According to Paul, one of the main purposes of the law was not to provide the Israelites permanent rescue from sin and death. Instead, when they were unable to keep the law perfectly, it was meant to show the people their desperate need before God. The law showed them their need for rescue outside of themselves; their need for a Savior.

Which brings us to Jesus, the epicenter of God's rescue plan: Jesus was God the Son, fully divine, who came in the flesh, fully human, born to a Jewish woman. Jesus lived a perfect life, loving God and others as we are not able to do and did so on our behalf. Though perfect, Jesus died the death that we deserved as the consequences of our sin. Jesus rose to new life, defeating sin and death. Through His life, death, and resurrection, we

are offered rescue: we are offered the gift of being brought back into God's presence - now through the presence of the Spirit, and some day face-to-face with God in the rescued and restored heavens and new earth. Through Jesus, we can be a part of God's family and God's work, now and forever. This adoption cannot be earned by following any set of laws. It is a gift of grace. We receive it through what Christ has done for us. This is the glorious gospel! And God offers it to all people, Jews and non-Jews alike.

Now let's zoom into the Galatians. The church contained both Jewish and Gentile Christians. A group, called the circumcision group or Judaizers, was telling the church that in order to be justified - a word that basically means rescued by God and brought into God's family - you not only had to have faith in Jesus, but also be circumcised and follow the law's dietary practices. In other words, they believed that in order to become Christian, you also had to culturally become a Jew. Paul writes Galatians to say "no! This is not true." He makes his case in all sorts of ways in the letter.

In the section we will read, Paul is recounting that the gospel he preached to them - faith in Jesus alone for all people - was approved by the church leaders, all who were culturally Jewish. Galatians 2:

After fourteen years, I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. I went in response to a revelation and, meeting privately with those esteemed as leaders, I presented to them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. I wanted to be sure I was not running and had not been running my race in vain. Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. This matter arose because some false believers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might

be preserved for you..... James, Cephas [Peter] and John, those esteemed as pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along.

The point here is that the church leaders - James, John, and Peter, who were all Jewish - agreed with Paul: the gospel is by faith alone. A person did not also have to become culturally Jewish to be rescued by God. What I find fascinating is happens next, after Paul had met with Peter. Continuing in verse 11:

When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? "We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified."

Can you imagine being at that dinner party, where Paul calls Peter out in front of everyone? Two pillars of the church going head-to-head. It seems drastic until you realize what was at stake. This was not an issue of Peter being rude to the Gentiles. Peter was not living in line with gospel. Through his refusal to eat and have fellowship with Gentiles,

Peter was communicating that in order to become a Christian, one also had to become a cultural Jew. What makes this shocking is that Peter knew this is not the truth. Not only was Peter part of that earlier conversation with Paul in which this heresy was struck down, but we read in Acts 10 and 11 that Peter had earlier experienced a direct revelation from God that all foods are clean, and that gospel was for Gentiles as Jews

Peter absolutely knew that the gospel was for everyone, and that one didn't have to adopt a certain culture to be Christian. So why was he pulled into the Judaizers circle? The text tells us it is because he was afraid of them. In his fear, Peter wasn't living into his identity in Christ, which Paul wonderfully summarizes at the end of chapter 3

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Paul is not saying that we cease to have distinctives when we come to Christ. Peter was still a Jew. I am a Jesus follower, and I'm still female (and thankful to be one.) We don't lose our ethnicities or rich diversity. They are still important. However, those distinctives are not the primary place we find our identity and worth. Those distinctives are not the way we are rescued and brought into God's family. Our identity and our rescue only come through being clothed in Christ.

Clothed in Christ. Isn't that a powerful image? Susannah will start Kindergarten in the fall and we've been exploring the school scene. Some schools require SMOD: Standard Mode of Dress. The kids are required to wear the same thing. Being clothed in Christ is a little like Jesus SMOD! And if we are all wearing the same thing, then our distinctives

cannot divide us as humans. *Our identity as people rescued by Christ creates a gospel unity that transcends our human distinctives.*

This is why Paul makes such a scene at the dinner party with Peter. Out of fear, Peter began to rely on his identity as a Jew - as a person coming from a particular nation and a particular culture, as his way to belong to God's family. In doing so, he was saying that Jesus wasn't enough. He was also failing to live out the marvelous implication of the gospel that we are one in Christ.

If Peter, who walked and talked with Jesus was tempted to find his identity in something other than Christ, that should make us pause. It tells us that we are prone to do the same thing. We too are prone to forget that we have been rescued and brought in to God's family by grace alone and instead find our identity in our external human distinctives- our culture, our nationality, our gender, our socio-economic status, our marital status, our political leanings, our preferred expression of worship...I'm sure you could add to that list. And just like Peter, when we start to rely on externals for our rescue and inclusion in God's family, we begin to circle up with people like us. In a word, we form tribes.

Peter circled up in a tribe because of fear. Fear can do the same to us, especially in this time of exile. During lent, we've been talking about how the American church is in exile - our influence has decreased and we are becoming marginalized. In an environment which can feel hostile, it is tempting to circle up with other believers and hunker down in a protective mode. We only hang out with other believers, and we avoid rubbing shoulders with unbelievers. And when we do so, we fail to live out Jesus' call to make disciples of all

nations. We fail to realize that there is no us and them but that we are all people who are in desperate need of rescue by Christ.

But tribalism doesn't just happen between Christians and non-Christians. It also happens inside the church, as it did in Galatia. I wonder if our temptation to form in-house tribes is even stronger than it was for the Galatians. By the day, our surrounding culture becomes more tribalized and those tribes become more polarized. The danger of mimicking what we see around us is strong.

Some of the ways in which we tribalize within the church are obvious: the plethora of denominations, the ways in which we divide by race or ethnicity. I'm grateful for the ways that our church has been making first steps to form unity across such divides, like last week when many of you visited other churches. We have much work to do in seeking unity between congregations and we need to heed that call. But for our remaining time I want to look closer to home - the ways in which we divide within congregations.

I don't think anyone in our congregation experiences tribalism quite like the Galatians. There is no group of people saying, "You must have faith in Jesus *and* be like us in order for God to rescue and welcome you."

The dangers of our tribalism are subtler, which make them more dangerous. The whisper of tribalism might sound like this:

- "if you were a true follower of Jesus, you'd vote for this political party like we do."
- "If you were a true follower of Jesus, you'd regularly practice silence and solitude like we do;"
- "If you were a true follower of Jesus, you'd serve in this way like we do."
- It's the whisper of "Jesus plus anything."

Tribalism might also result from the unintended consequences of hanging out with people who are like us. We circle up in homogeneous groups: parents with small children, empty nesters, singles, married couples, business people, tradespeople, and on and on. Don't get me wrong: scripture is not telling us that it is wrong to have spiritual friends with whom we share life and encouragement. That is good and needed. But if we find ourselves *only* with people like us - whether that is gender, age, politics, passions, socio-economic status, type of job, - we might unintentionally become, or be perceived, as a tribe.

In our tribes we can be slowly lured into believing that all Christians should look, think, and act like us. In our tribes, we miss the rich diversity of God's family. In our tribes, we can avoid the difficult work of talking about our real disagreements graciously, on the basis of our gospel unity. And in our tribes, we might unintentionally communicate to others that they are not welcome to the table and into God's family.

I think of my experience at the preschool hot dog dinner, and I wonder how often that happens in churches. Someone has mustered the courage to enter church or Christian community and when they do, they find people already circled up with no place left at the table.

Sure - they might find a seat in a pew or chair, but no room to be invited into our life together. I am certain that I have done this, too wrapped up in my comfort and those I already know to recognize one who is asking "Is there a place for me in God's family?"

The answer to that question is always yes. We want to be able to share resounding yes in our words and in our life together, which creates room for more to join.

Our identity as people rescued by Christ creates a gospel unity that transcends our human distinctives. Living out this truth challenges and encourages us to reject tribalism and seek unity.

So how do we do that? I want to briefly suggest two things.

First, with the Lord, conduct an audit. Examine who you spend time with, who you encounter during the week. Is it people who look, act, feel and think like you? If that's the case, have a conversation with the Lord about why this is so. Maybe it's because it's convenient or comfortable. Maybe it reveals that we have placed too much of our self-worth and identity in our human distinctives, instead of in Christ. Do the audit, and then ask the Lord who you might reach out to this week, even in our church family, who is different than you and to do so on the basis of our gospel unity.

Second, and most important, remember who you are. You and I are people who were in need of desperate rescue. And Jesus lived, died, and rose to rescue us. Christ offers us his righteousness to wear and invites us to sit at God's Table. We don't sit at God's Table because of any human distinctive or accomplishment. The more grounded we become in our identity as rescued and adopted by grace alone, the less we will rely on what divides us and the more eager we will be to invite others to sit at God's Table as well.

I can't think of any better way to remember who we are than to come to the Lord's table. At the communion table, we are reminded that Jesus gave his life - his body and his blood - in order to rescue us. At the table, we are reminded of truth that we don't come alone, but we come with all those who have embraced Christ, as God's one family. At the table we experience the Lord's presence and glimpse His promised future: one day when Christ returns, every nation, tribe, and tongue will gather together to feast in God's

presence, our true home. Let's pray and ask Him to use this sacrament as a way to unite us to Him and each other.