

## **GOD IS DOING A NEW THING: CONFRONTING RACISM**

Galatians 3:26-29

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As many of you know, I spent last week at the United Church of Christ Senior Minister's Gathering. I saw some old friends, met some new colleagues, learned a lot...and walked the Florida beach. It certainly does not take a lot of arm-twisting to convince me to go to a conference in Florida in January.

Here is one of the more memorable stories I heard last week - a true story shared by my new friend Sarah, a pastor in a Boston suburb. Sarah was invited to go to Israel last summer with a diverse group of colleagues - all pastors from the Boston area. It was not a Holy Land pilgrimage as much as an opportunity to learn about the various political complexities of the region, and their trip involved meeting with Israelis and Palestinians. But the organizers of the trip knew that these pastors would want to see some of the holy sites, so they made time for that, too, including a stop at the River Jordan, the site of the baptism of Jesus. You can become baptized in the River Jordan if you wish, or you can re-experience your baptism there. Sarah said, "Two of those in our group were from black Baptist traditions, one man and one woman. The very tall black man was the first to say, "I'm going in the river Jordan." Then the black woman said, "I am too. Sarah, would you go in with me?" Sarah doesn't like water, and she really doesn't like having her head under water, but her colleague asked her to go and so she said "yes." She stepped out of her comfort zone. The three of them went into the changing rooms where you are given white baptismal robes to wear. The man

asked Sarah to immerse him in the water. Because he was so tall, it actually took her and the other woman, one on each side. Then the other woman was immersed. And then it was Sarah's turn. When she emerged from the water, she realized that the black male pastor was holding her right hand, and the black female pastor was holding her left hand. She committed herself, then and there, as she emerged anew from the baptismal waters, that this would be the year that she spends holding hands with new people.

Our worship series title reminds us, using words from the book of Isaiah which Beau preached on last week, that God is doing a new thing. I don't have to tell you that our world is changing at a dizzying, exhausting pace. Every day, it seems, there's a new device, a new app, a new upgrade. Just when you learn to use your phone, or your computer, you have to update your software and nothing works right anymore. So much new. Too much new, or so it seems. Isaiah says that God is doing a new thing. The God who was with us yesterday, the God who is with us today, will be with us tomorrow...in fact, some people who think about God say that God is already in the future. We sing it every Sunday at 9 AM: "As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be...world without end..." God has no beginning and no end. It's more than we can easily wrap our minds around, but somehow it's very comforting, this notion that God is already in the future, gently ushering us into it, opening the door for us, putting out the welcome mat. The future doesn't seem so scary, so unknown, if we know that God is already there.

So we walk into this new year in confidence. We are not alone. God is with us. But what God is doing is a new thing. The God of justice, the God of compassion, the God who loves ALL people, has looked around at our world and has proclaimed, "This

will not do.” “This is not the world I intended. I did not create people so that they would treat each other cruelly. It is not my will that some live in mansions and some in squalor. It is not my will that some go on luxury vacations and others spend their entire growing-up years in refugee camps.” God has surveyed the scene and observed that we have created such divisions among us that there are like chasms. Some people begin life at such a disadvantage that it takes a near-miraculous set of circumstances for them to even get close to an even playing field.” God is doing a new thing, calling us to a world of fairness.

One of the books we read in one of the church book clubs last year was a memoir entitled, Waking Up White. The author, Debby Irving, grew up in an upper-middle-class suburb of Boston, taking for granted the privilege and status that her race and class had given her. But one day something new is born in her. Something new tugs at her, and she begins exploring the complicated system that afforded her so many advantages just because of the color of her skin. She writes this: “[In America today], children of color grow up believing that they are inferior and less deserving. Racism crushes spirits, incites divisiveness, and justifies the estrangement of entire groups of individuals who, like all humans, come into the world full of goodness, with a desire to connect, and with boundless capacity to learn and grow. Unless adults understand racism, they will, as I did, unknowingly teach it to their children. No one alive today created this mess, but everyone alive today has the power to work on undoing it...Understanding how and why our beliefs developed along racial lines holds the promise of healing, liberation, and the unleashing of America’s vast human potential.”

If you were emerging from the water where Jesus was baptized, if you emerged from your fear of water knowing you were held in safety by the black hand grasping your right and the black hand grasping your left, would you promise, as Sarah did, to spend the next year holding hands with new people? If you surveyed the landscape of our nation today, and saw the inequalities and the disparities that are tearing apart the fabric of our country, would you hear God calling us, perhaps through tears, to try something new? I have always lived in communities that are mostly white. I attended schools that were predominantly white. I therefore have a very incomplete understanding of the world as it is experienced by people of color. I am a reader, so one thing I am doing to educate myself is reading more stories about people of color by people of color, and reading more stories about the way that class and race have influenced America. You may not like to read. You may prefer books on tape, or you may look for those movies, films, documentaries, television shows, podcasts that open your eyes in new ways.

Exploring the issues of race and class and privilege is not about making some people feel guilty. It's not about shame or fault or blame. It is about listening deeply to the lived experience of people on the other side of the divide, accepting their story for what it is, accepting other's people's life experiences as they tell them, without judgment. When we listen deeply to one another, we will begin to be changed. We will find ourselves saying, "I never thought of it that way before." We will find ourselves reacting differently when we hear a story on the news, or when we hear a joke with a bit of a racist edge to it. We will speak up, then, because we care about the lives of those whose stories we have taken in to our hearts. And this is how the world is changed, one ripple at a time.

When Paul wrote his letter to the church at Galatia, the church was embroiled in a controversy that was splitting it down the middle. At the risk of over-simplifying, here's the issue Paul is addressing. The first Christians were Jews. Like Jesus himself, his first followers were all Jewish. They did not see themselves as belonging to a new religion; Jesus' way of living was more of a reformation. After the resurrection, after the Day of Pentecost and the birth of the church, as time goes by, these Jewish Christians begin to organize themselves into house churches with particular practices. And the word, the good news of Jesus, begins to spread to Gentiles, non-Jewish people. Paul was particularly passionate about converting Gentiles to Christianity. He wanted people to believe in the life, death and resurrection of Christ - a story that had radically transformed his life, and had the power to transform other people's lives. So in Galatia, he preached this story to Gentiles and told them how they could live as Christians. But the Jewish Christians thought that these new converts should also be Jewish, at least adopt some Jewish practices, like circumcision. Paul says, "No." We are not going backwards. We are new people. We have all been baptized in the same water. God has done a new thing in Christ Jesus. "If you have been baptized, you have put on the clothes of Christ. We are all baptized Christians. We're all wearing the same clothes, the same uniform. We are now on the same team." "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female - we all no belong to Christ."

Paul challenges his Jewish brothers and sisters. As a Jew himself, he says, "Can you see one another with new eyes?" Of course we're different, but what we're going to focus on is what we have in common." If we recognize how much we have in

common with one another, we will treat one another with the dignity and respect we ourselves want.

When you think of states that have a large influx of refugees, you might not think of North Dakota. But in 2016, North Dakota took in the second-most number of refugees per capita, most from Bhutan, Iraq and Somalia. Refugee resettlement has a long history in North Dakota - it began in the 1940s, during World War II, as a part of the mission of the Lutheran church when Lutherans from Germany, Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia were fleeing Europe. But in recent decades, the arrivals to the region have increasingly been black and brown Muslims, triggering racial and religious tensions.

A 40-year-old named Damon, who works as an automation technician, started an online petition called, "Stop refugee resettlement and Lutheran Social Services in North Dakota". His views represent many.

A professor at Concordia College was observing the conflict in her town and decided to try to do something to help. This past spring, a listening project was launched, with great fanfare and publicity, and an enthusiastic recruiting effort. Even Damon agreed to participate. Here's how it worked. Natives of Fargo, North Dakota, a town which is 95% caucasian, were paired with a new immigrant, one on one. They sat together for one entire day. One person would tell his/her life story while the other took notes, they would break for lunch, and then it was the other person's turn. Damon was paired with a man named Arday, who came to North Dakota from Ghana in the 90's and now has an IT business. They each tell their story, the other listens. The next day the entire group gathers. And all the stories are told in a big group, but you don't tell your

own story. You tell the story you heard - in that person's words. So Arday stood up and said, "My name is Damon. I started a petition. I don't consider myself a racist and I don't like being called one." And Damon stood up and said, "My name is Arday. When I landed in New York, it was the first time I'd felt cold. I had \$25 in my pocket. I took a Greyhound bus to Fargo." What difference has it made in each of their lives, that they took two days to listen to one another? What difference has the listening project made in Fargo? It's too early to tell.

To me, it sounds like a new thing. Actually it sounds like something God would do.