

First Presbyterian Church
Galatians 3:26-4:7, “Time to Grow Up”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 9/29/2024

When I was a kid, I hated tomatoes.

I mean, would not eat anything that had a tomato on it.

A smooth sauce was the *only* acceptable format for the monstrosity known as the tomato.

If a tomato were to accidentally enter my mouth,

I entered into an involuntary gag reflex.

This went so deep, that it was like a part of my personality.

It was important to me that I didn't like tomatoes –

I was “the kind of person who doesn't eat tomatoes.”

But then I started experimenting with other new foods.

I went to Japan with my brother and his wife in 1993 and we ate ... *sushi*.

(I liked it.)

And I thought it was kind of cool that I liked sushi,

which you might remember was still new and exotic in the 90s,

but I also thought it was important to hate ... tomatoes.

After a few years I realized, this isn't who I am, this is just immaturity.

It's time to grow up and be someone who eats tomatoes.

It took a lot of courage and persistence ... but I made it. (Thanks, Mom!)

Growing up doesn't happen all at once.

And yet there are moments where our growth becomes suddenly apparent—

I have recently witnessed astonishing growth spurts in my kids.

You have probably seen an unexpectedly mature response

from yourself or your loved ones when faced with unwanted tragedy.

Sometimes a person will suddenly display courage before danger

when neither they nor anyone else knew they had it in them.

A pastor friend of mine has a 16 year old son went to camp as a counsellor

for the whole summer. Multiple months of having real responsibilities,

managing camper's activities,

taking charge when the unexpected happened.

He came back and announced,

“I don't have interest in childish things anymore ... I'm a man now.”

We might chuckle inside because we know
there are a few more lessons yet to learn.

And yet at the same time, there are these moments of growth
in life where we graduate to a new level of maturity.

The Apostle Paul is telling the church in Galatia that Jesus Christ has
created one of those moments in the life of God's people.

The passage we read today describes a story of maturing and growth.
But not the story of an individual's growth –
this is the story of *the whole people of God* at a cosmic scale.

Paul uses two different metaphors to describe
the maturing of the people of God:
life under a guardian / tutor, and adoption to sonship.

Both of these metaphors come from life in ancient Roman culture,
which makes sense because Galatia was a Roman province,
so he was speaking to the lived experience of the people there.

The first metaphor is that of a custodian or a guardian:

**²³Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law,
locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. ²⁴So the law was
put in charge of us until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵Now
that this faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.**

There are many different English translations for the phrase “put in charge of us,”
that we see here. Some say “guardian,” others “tutor,”
“custodian,” or “disciplinarian.” The Greek word is *paidagogos* or
pedagogue.

Here's what Nijay Gupta says about this person's role in Roman society:
“Ancient pedagogues were non-family members of the household, who were
put in charge of a child for about ten years of their youth until late
adolescence.”

The point is that the Law served a similar purpose for Israel:
For a period of time (thousands of years!) the Law served a purpose
of discipline, instruction, guidance, and oversight.

The Law was a good gift, a source of many blessings,
but it was not able to bring Israel into a place of maturity.
Now be careful: this does not mean newer is better than older –
for Abraham *also* knew God by faith,
as did many others in Israel's history.

What has changed is that in Christ's life, death, and resurrection,
the focus of faith has been made clear:
By faith we are baptized into Christ and we are clothed with Christ.

It's not that Jesus lives in us, but that we live in him!
By faith, we enter into the life of Christ who has fulfilled the Law,
and therefore the categories of the Law are no longer pertinent.

We are clothed with Christ so that our other identities and status markers
fade into the background.
All that matters when we look at one another
is that we see someone as being found in Christ.

This leads to one of the great moments in all of Scripture: Gal. 3:28.
Paul says that faith in Christ represents a tremendous shift
which moves beyond the custody of the Law so that
binary categories of Jew / Gentile, Male / Female, Slave / Free
no longer create barriers within the people of God.

Paul isn't saying these distinctions don't exist, or even that they should be resisted.
He's saying that they don't divide us into tiers or ranks of Christians.
Everyone in Christ is equal. Whoever you are, wherever you're from,
you belong. Truly and fully.

Additionally – keep in mind that Paul is talking primarily about people groups,
not individuals. This happening on the scale of thousands of years.

In the second half of the passage,
Paul shifts to the second analogy about growing up: adoption.

This is super interesting, because Roman culture had totally different ideas
about adoption than we have today.

I share this slide directly from Nijay Gupta's presentation:

Category	Modern Western Assumptions	Roman Adoption
Purpose	Compassion, companionship	Continuation: name, property, honor/reputation, familial cult practices
Adoptees	Boys or girls, usually children	Adult males, sometimes posthumously
Status of adoptees	Cultural stereotype: unfortunate, poor, no status	Competitive: power of inheritance/heir Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Nero, Trajan, Hadrian, Marcus Aurelius

So for Romans, you aren't adopted so that you can grow up and mature.
No, first a person must prove that they are mature, *then* you are adopted!

In this analogy, Paul is saying that everyone who is in Christ – regardless of their ethnicity, gender, or cultural status, has been adopted by God as though they were the first-born son in a Roman family.

Just like being clothed with Christ, we are also adopted as Christ, so that we get the same status of belonging that Jesus has.
In that status, we have matured, we have grown up in God's eyes, and we receive the Spirit of God who calls out "Abba, Father."

Without that, we are still subject to the "elemental spiritual forces of the world."
The *stoicheia tou kosmou*.

While Paul's first analogy set aside the Jewish law, this analogy sets aside the pagan powers of Rome.

Taken together, Paul is saying to everyone, regardless of their cultural background, that when we come to Christ by faith we experience a tremendous moment of liberating growth that frees us from the restrictions known in earlier eras.

/S *Well, thank God for that! Nice to have that settled, isn't it?*
Isn't it great that we live in this *mature* era of faith
where we have no distinctions on the church
between race or gender or economic status or politics?

Sarcasm aside, if we're all one in Christ and these categories don't divide us
then why do we see so much division in the church over these very issues?
Because the threat of a false gospel *from within the church*
which denies the radical deliverance we have through Christ
is still alive and well.

I want to show you what that looks like. [Slide]
This is Ina, a Russian bear that was abused for years and kept in a cage.
While in the cage, Ina could only walk in a very small circle
for hours and hours every day.

When Ina was rescued and released into a huge wilderness area in Russia,
there was hope that she would find other bears
and be able to have a better life.

But instead, she just walked in circles.
Even though she had been freed, she acted like she was still in her cage.
What an unbelievably sad story.

I apologize for sharing that with you because it is awful.
But that is what it's like when those who know the way of faith
return anyway to the old categories of the Law.

It has been 1,975 years since Paul wrote this letter.
If you look around at the way many Christians behave,
we're still walking around in circles as though we were
subject to the Law, as though we were powerless
against the *stoicheia tou kosmou*.

Speaking of division, I want us to consider for a moment the horrors
that took place in Israel on Oct. 7 of last year...
the horrors of the hundreds of people kidnapped
and sometimes abused and murdered by Hamas...
and the horrors of 50,000 or more Palestinians
and now thousands more Lebanese people
who have died in Israeli attacks...

plus the millions all across the region of every nationality
who are grieving and frightened and traumatized.

This is the land of Abraham and Sarah – claimed by Jews, Christians, and Muslims
as their founding family.

The United States is by no means an outsider to all of this –
they are actually make billions of dollars off this conflict
by selling weapons to Israel, while also calling for peace.

This conflict makes me feel ill.

Where is the maturity as people over the centuries? Over the millenia?

I believe that the good news of knowing God by faith is the only way forward.
The good news which says that in Christ there is no Jew or Gentile.

This does not mean that I believe modern Christians or the modern church
is currently pointing the way forward.

No – most of the Christian world is walking in circles
on this issue like Ina the bear.

Many act as if they are still enslaved to the *stoicheia tou kosmou*,
the powers of the world.

Which means that now, as in Paul's time,
and as noted repeatedly by ancient Israel's prophets,
we must look for a remnant of people who find the way of faith.
We must look for the narrow gate of wisdom.

And yet! ... the way of faith is available to all. How is that possible,
if we're talking about being found "in Christ?"
Because the gospel was announced in advance to Abraham.

To prove it, let me share with you two poems – one from a Muslim poet,
one from a Jewish poet.

Both of these reveal the same wisdom we encounter
in Paul's poetic lines from Galatians 3:28.

They don't discuss Christ,
but (from my perspective as a Christian)
they reveal the road that leads us to Christ.

**Rumi: Out Beyond Ideas
of Wrongdoing and Rightdoing**

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
There is a field. I'll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
The world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase *each other*
Doesn't make any sense.

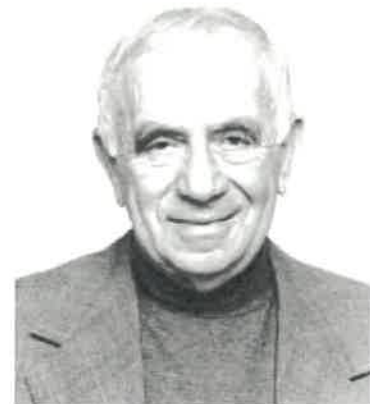


Yehuda Amichai: From The Place Where We Are Right

From the place where we are right
flowers will never grow
in the spring.

The place where we are right
is hard and trampled
like a yard.

But doubts and loves
dig up the world
like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
where the ruined
house once stood.



Amichai's poem was written in the aftermath of the six day war in 1967,
which resulted in Israel's occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Out beyond ideas of Jew and Gentile, beyond slave and free,
beyond who attacked who first or worst and how to respond,
beyond Democrats and Republicans, beyond us and them ...
there is a field.

In the field, we encounter the Living God, who calls us beloved
and invites us to abide there with our Creator and with one another.
That is the good news of Jesus.