

The old song reminds us that Father Abraham had many children and many children had Father Abraham. I am one of them, and so are you, so let's all praise the Lord! And we repeat again.

In this morning's text, there seems to be some confusion in the Church at Galatia as to who can be one of Abraham's many kiddos. And there may also be a little bit of concern as to if we've already got too many.

Let me offer a little context this morning, first about Abraham and Torah, then about Jesus, and ultimately about this conversation between Paul and the Galatians. Here goes:

Genesis tells us that God called Abram, later renamed Abraham, from Haran, a connector city in Mesopotamia, to the land of Canaan, which would later be known as Israel. We don't really have a lot of details. For whatever reason, the text tells us that God wanted Abram and his family to make their way into this new land, and their fidelity toward God would be rewarded with land and progeny in the generations to come – think stars in the sky and grains of sand on the beach. That's how many descendants. Think horizons that never end. That's how much land.

Over the years, a central cult developed, and with it a code, or law, which we know as Torah. More than 600 ordinances became a rigorous guide to ensuring that God's people would be faithful to God's covenants: Noadic, Abrahamic, and Mosaic. Adherence to Torah would ensure the longevity and prosperity of Abraham's descendants. Adherence to Torah would make God's people heirs to Abraham's blessings.

Over thousands of years, as major empires like Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome take shape, the Jewish diaspora will expand to every corner of the civilized world. The strict adherence to some of Torah's regulations – diet, dress, circumcision, marriage, etc. – will ensure its survival, its identity, and its blessings.

The Gospels tell us the story of Jesus. Torah is again front and center. Matthew says that Jesus comes to fulfill Torah. Mark and Luke insist that Jesus has a concise summary for the application of Torah: love God and love neighbor.

Here's what I find fascinating. From the very beginning of our scriptures, we hear about a God of ever-expansive circles. God's love evolves from a spark of light to a whole universe of creatures and creations; God's love moves outward from individual encounters with people like Abraham and Sarah and Moses and Miriam to communal, and even national encounters with clans, tribes, and eventually the whole of Israel; when the Spirit arrives at Pentecost, God operates in global circles.

God intends for Torah, a more formal expression of covenant, to be a mechanism that expands the circle of God's love. But all too often Torah was, has been, keeps on being weaponized in a way to constrict and reduce the circles of God's love. It's been used to hoard blessings instead of sharing them.

I think the reason we are still talking about Jesus; I think the reason our world has been transformed and is continuing to transform, is that here in Jesus, is one that fulfilled Torah. Jesus had a connectedness and a presence with God that allowed him to interpret/live/share/experience (you name the verb) Torah in a way that expanded the circles of God's

love. Something in the way that Jesus loved, transcended what had existed before, and humanity has never been the same.

Most of us would agree there was definitely some kind of specialumph or essence about Jesus – he lived in a transcendent way, and his transcendence impacts us, even changes the possibilities for our own lives. It's the expression of Jesus' transcendence that often divides our thinking. We agree his story is special. We often disagree with what makes it special.

Paul is having a conversation about the nature and character of Jesus with a group of fellow believers in Galatia. It's fair to say they have different ideas about what's special.

And listen, I know Paul has his intricacies, and if he were here at Sardis, we'd have some healthy differences of opinion regarding the totality and meaning of the Jesus story. Dialogue is the term we like to use.

For today's text, I think it's important to realize the weight Paul gives to the transformative nature of the entire Jesus story. For Paul, Jesus has lived, died, and been resurrected in such a way as to rescript human history. Jesus has channeled and connected us to God in a way that was not possible prior to his earthly existence, or at least had never been realized prior to his earthly existence. But now, humanity is freed to move beyond the barriers that prevented connection. And for Paul, if you can tap into that realization; your expression, your discipline, your structure is secondary. And while Paul can make us shake our heads in too many ways in these modern times, it shouldn't be lost on you that a one-time Pharisee, who lived his faith with precise rigor, recognizes the unending potential and unity of the Spirit.

Oh man, but these Galatians, at one point they are even called foolish Galatians, these Galatians aren't ready to stop being led by an overly litigious Torah. For the Galatians, it's an adherence to Torah that keeps them connected to God. The transactional ensures the transformational. Follow the code. Be pure. Tighten the circle. That's the avenue to Abraham's descendance, to Abraham's blessing.

But Paul says, "You don't need Torah to possess or maintain an identity as God's beloved. The life of Jesus revealed God's solidarity with all humanity. And when we follow Jesus, no matter who, where, what, when, or how we are, we secure our identity as God's beloved. We find ourselves with the same intimate connection Abraham and Sarah experienced so many generations ago."

Powers and systems shaped a world where stranger, widow, and orphan were left vulnerable to abuse. Torah emerges as a way to not only prevent that abuse, but to create communities that better reflect God's intention. There's a rhythm of rest, generosity, and hospitality that seeks to announce the notes of God's love and justice. But that rhythm is disrupted if it's not infused with authenticity. Torah was never meant to be a Mad Lib or a proficiency test. Torah was meant to help open the Spirit to transformation.

Jesus, and later Paul, help us distinguish between a Torah that is transactional and one that is transformational. In loving God and neighbor, we find a new identity:

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. (Galatians 3:28-29, NRSV).

No longer Jew or Greek; slave or free; male or female. But one, one in Christ Jesus. Paul chooses the three most prominent divisions of power in his world. These divisions determine your role in the faith house, in the household, in the family structure, in every decision-making process. He also chooses three categories that ripple through the story of Abraham. Abraham's sons by Sarah, free and deemed faithful by covenant and circumcision, know blessings. But the women, and the servants and the slaves, and the children born on the wrong side of the bloodlines, and those deemed unfaithful, experience alienation, and they are all too often left waiting for blessings. And be it Canaan, or Jerusalem, or Rome, or even Charlotte, NC that story keeps on repeating itself.

But...but...but, but, but Paul says, Jesus is freeing us from the bondage and dependency and toxicity of disconnectedness and division. Jesus is telling us the circle is big enough, expansive enough, strong enough, creative enough for everyone to receive God's love, and to know a world like Abraham's.

And today, I suppose the challenge for us, is to faith this new story.

Today is Juneteenth, and I can't help but think of those sisters and brothers in Louisiana and Texas, who more than a century and a half ago belatedly, finally received word of emancipation. That day, it was no longer just the children of Sarah, but also the children of Hagar who were part of this tangible oneness, too. Genesis says Abraham's descendants would be as bountiful as the stars in the sky. And if that's

Let's All Praise the Lord!
Bob Stillerman
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Galatians 3:23-29



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

true, and the number is infinite, why must we keep insisting on finiteness?

Can we not imagine a God who is bigger than Torah? Can we not imagine a God whose love is big enough to parent every child? Can we not imagine a God whose enough-ness is SO much more than this world's most-ness?

In the life of Jesus, we know an indisputable truth: God is love!!! And God's love is accessible, abundant, available, infinite; yours, mine, everyone's, now and forever more. This is the promise, friends. This is the blessing, friends. And we are all heirs to that promise.

Father Abraham has EVERY Child and EVERY child has Father Abraham. I am one of them, and so are you, so let's all praise the Lord!

Amen.