

All Of You Are One

Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey

Isaiah 49:1-7; Galatians 3:23-29
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
January 15, 2023 – Matthew 25 Sunday

Today's worship service has a Matthew 25 focus, which is part of Lewinsville's affiliation with the Matthew 25 initiative of the Presbyterian Church. This initiative is grounded in Jesus' words in the Gospel of Matthew 25, where he says "whatever you do to the least of these who are members of my family – the hungry, the thirsty, the prisoner, the stranger – you have done it unto me." As the Presbyterian Church seeks to set a direction for the church going forward, seeking to be faithful to our call to follow Jesus, seeking to live *in the world* without being *of the world*, and wanting local congregations to thrive, our denomination established three pillars of the Matthew 25 initiative: enhancing local congregational vitality; doing that with a focus on addressing the realities of systemic poverty, knowing that Jesus came – according to Luke 4 and other texts – to bring good news to the poor; and highlighting within that, a particular focus on the realities of structural racism.

In the wake of the killing of George Floyd in the early summer of 2020, Lewinsville's pastors and Session felt called in a particular way to learn more about and to engage the issue of racism. We did this, in the awareness that we are a predominantly white congregation, in the predominantly white denomination of the Presbyterian Church USA, but also in the local context of Fairfax County, one of the most diverse counties in the country, where more than 160 languages are spoken in the public school system here. This is not to beat up on ourselves, because that doesn't get us anywhere, but it does mean that there is work for us to lean into. There is a very deep awareness and recognition that these issues are enormously complex, but there is an equally deep sense that that complexity is not a reason or an excuse to put these issues aside.

Revelation 7:9 speaks of the kingdom of God as an energetic and beautiful community of people, the text says, "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages," which sounds a lot like the energy and beauty of Fairfax County. When the church does not resemble that vision of the kingdom, it means that we've got further to go. I've also been personally moved by the encouragement of friends in Black churches, to lean into this work because of its foundational importance for our healing – as individuals and as a broader community.

So over the last couple of years here at Lewinsville, we've had adult education classes about the history of race in the Presbyterian church; we've had some history work done on our own cemetery, including some of the enslaved persons who are buried here; the Faith and Public Policy series around 'Pathways Out Of Poverty' had

points of contact with the Matthew 25 initiative, as does our work with an Afghan refugee family; our youth group went to a Matthew 25-related retreat at Massanetta Springs; Pastor Jen and Deirdre Ramsey led a book study; our monthly Bible study with Shiloh Baptist Church, though not a formal Matthew 25 effort, has some points of connection as well. All of this – including the music we sing – all of this is about grounding ourselves in a deeper readiness to follow Jesus in crossing borders that our world sets up to separate and divide people from each other, and to let Jesus be the source of our unity and fellowship with each other, and nothing else. To let Jesus be the source of our unity and fellowship with each other, and nothing else.

All of which brings us to Galatians 3.

Paul's letter to the Galatians is a thundering epistle. Galatians has been described as Paul's stormiest letter, so if you're wanting to experience thunder in the Bible, Galatians is a good place to go. What has Paul so upset in this letter is that there are voices in the Galatian congregation that are telling people that Jesus alone is not sufficient for their unity as a congregation. We recall that in the early days of the church, a major issue that was being sorted out was the relationship between Jewish believers and Gentile believers in the church. The covenant community had been originally, since the days of Abraham, the people of Israel, the Jewish community gathered around and defined by the Torah, a word that is often translated as 'the law.' Within that community, the initiating ritual of membership was circumcision for males. Now, there were *uncircumcised*, Gentile God-fearers around the temple in Jerusalem, but these were not full participants in the community. Paul's explosive theological insight was that through Jesus Christ, Gentiles had been *grafted into* the covenant community, and that Christ alone was sufficient for these Gentiles. They did not need any other qualifications. Jesus alone was the source of their unity and fellowship, and nothing else.

But in the Galatian congregation, there were now voices saying that in order to be a full, real member of the covenant community of the church, circumcision was still necessary. Sort of a "that's just the way it's always been done." To which Paul thunders, "NO." "Jesus is the source of your unity, nothing else, especially not anything done to your skin. Jesus' faithfulness to God has opened the covenant community up to Gentile believers. Jesus, in his faithfulness, has lived out Isaiah 49:6, which Linton read first today, where he is the light to the nations, not just to one particular tribe.

In the language of Ephesians 2:14, Jesus breaks down the dividing walls of hostility between us. When we are baptized into him, there is no longer Jew or Gentile, no longer slave or free, no longer male and female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus.

The world will likely continue to think that its various categories by which it pigeonholes people into different boxes and different parts of town and tragically too many different outcomes in health care and incarceration and generational wealth and

more, the world may continue to think that those categories still have a say in who's an insider and who's an outsider, who's a full-fledged member of the community and who's not, but the church of Revelation 7:9 and Ephesians 2:14 and Matthew 25 and Galatians 3:28 knows that our unity, which means our freedom, is in Jesus.

In February 1957, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote a pamphlet for the National Council of Churches' 35 annual observance of Race Relations Sunday, in which he drew deeply on Galatians 3:28. In that pamphlet, King wrote, "All men, created alike in the image of God, are inseparably bound together. This is at the very heart of the Christian gospel. ...it is expressed in the affirmation, 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' The climax of this universality is expressed in the fact that Christ died for all mankind. This broad universality standing at the center of the Gospel makes brotherhood morally inescapable. Racial segregation is a blatant denial of the unity which we all have in Christ....Every Christian is confronted with the basic responsibility of working courageously for a non-segregated society. The task of conquering segregation is an inescapable *must* confronting the Christian churches. Much progress has been made," King wrote in 1957, "toward the goal of a non-segregated society, but we are still far from the promised land....The churches are called upon to recognize the urgent necessity of taking a forthright stand on this crucial issue. If we are to remain true to the Gospel of Jesus Christ we must not rest until segregation is banished from every area of American life....If we accept the challenge with more devotion and valor, we can speed the day when men everywhere will recognize that we 'are all one in Christ Jesus'."

This work of building the beloved community, of moving together towards greater freedom, is beautiful work. It's challenging work in many different ways, it will require a lot of different things from each one of us, but my goodness, it is a gift, and it is great work for us to get to do together. To God and to God alone be all the glory. Amen.