

WE ARE ALL ONE

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Anne Gavin Ritchie on June 20, 2010,
the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, based on Galatians 3:23-29 and St. Luke 8:26-37.*

As some of you may know, I am not one of St. Paul's biggest fans. I admire him for his learning, his supreme intelligence. He does not, on the other hand, seem like he was the easiest person to get along with. He seems also to have had major difficulties with his sense of pride. Almost at the same time he writes of "boasting only in the Lord" he can't help but slip in some self-congratulatory remark. I believe that Paul also was responsible for the shift from *following* Jesus – which Jesus invites us to do – to *worshipping* him – which I don't believe Jesus had any interest in. "Why do you call me good?" Jesus asks a would-be disciple. "No one is good but God alone."

However, one of Paul's greatest statements is enshrined in today's reading from Galatians. In the context of baptism Paul teaches, "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."

Paul, the former persecutor of Christians, now understands that when we share Christ, all divisions break down. Ethnic, religious, class and gender differences no longer have relevance. We are all one in the love of Jesus Christ. Radically one, completely one. We are truly brothers and sisters, fellow children of God.

Easier said than lived. There is some perverse streak in human nature that wants to see divisions, that wants to set boundaries. Human nature seems to want to put some people in the right, while others are permanently wrong. I can only suppose that this instinct comes from some ancient survival mechanism – your tribe must suffer so my tribe can flourish. We carry that ancient, outmoded instinct into the 21st-century at our own risk.

Now more than ever before, the global community is one. We see that what the Tokyo stock market did while we were sleeping has a direct bearing on our own stock exchange. Look at the wide-ranging effects of volcanic ash on the air industry and world economies a month or so ago. I wouldn't be surprised if the devastating oil flow in the Gulf of Mexico eventually affects countries on the other side of the Atlantic.

Our fortunes on this planet are tied together. We just keep acting as if they were not, even when something is drawing us to a more faithful response. I'm reminded of the story of a young black minister, who had received a call from a prominent white Christian leader asking him out for lunch.

During their lunch, the white minister confessed that he had been having a hard time sleeping at night. He told him "I just got back from an annual conference on reconciliation and cross-cultural ministry. When black church leaders come into the meeting, we act respectfully and make them feel included. But the truth is that all the major decisions have already been made. In their absence, people joke and even use the N-word.

“I don’t like the fact that I sat there and did nothing to stop it. But I’d really like to be your colleague and friend. How can we get to know each other?”

The black minister told him, “Well, one of my favorite things to do is cook out. Why don’t you come over to my house? Bring your wife and meet my wife, and we’ll just sit and talk and get to know each other. I’ll barbecue some steaks and we’ll start there.”

The black minister wrote down his home phone number and address and asked him to call. He never heard from him again.

Sometimes old patterns of division and difference feel insurmountable.

The Episcopal Church is experiencing further punishments for having consecrated Mary Glasspool as Suffragan Bishop of Los Angeles. In response, a disapproving Archbishop of Canterbury suggested that Episcopal leaders involved in ecumenical dialogue should voluntarily resign from such groups. Next the Secretary General of the Anglican Communion informed them that their membership had been discontinued. (This includes the Reverend Dr. Kathy Grieb of Virginia Seminary.)

New affronts came just last week when our Presiding Bishop, the Most Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori arrived in England to accept an invitation to preach and celebrate at a cathedral in South London. She was informed by Lambeth Palace (that means the Archbishop of Canterbury) that she should refrain from wearing her mitre, the pointed hat that bishops have traditionally worn for thousands of years. Gamely, Bishop Katharine went ahead, carrying, not wearing her mitre. (This incident has now been dubbed “Mitregate.”) Not only that, but before she arrived her office was required to re-send proof – get this – of her ordinations as deacon, as priest and as bishop, a formality she complied with years ago! With typical restraint, Bishop Katharine simply said it was “bizarre.”

The Episcopal Church and the larger Anglican Communion have to decide on what basis we achieve and celebrate unity. Will it mean all of us agreeing on every detail of dogma and doctrine? It never has before. Or will that “large tent” of traditional Anglicanism, respecting divergent theologies and understandings of God’s grace ultimately prevail? When will we, like the Gerasene demoniac, “come into our right mind”?

I was very impressed by the thinking of bible commentator Robert Leslie. Here’s what he writes about today’s Gospel passage: “Whether the causal factors were ever really uncovered, the final scene, showing the ‘demoniac’ restored to normalcy, sitting and talking with Jesus, suggests the renewal of communication – the breakthrough from isolation to interpersonal relationship... It is not strange that the man wanted to stay with Jesus. Having found someone who had helped him accept himself and to see himself in a more meaningful way of life, he wanted to hold on to this new interpreter of life, but Jesus would have none of it. The real test of life, he knew so well, was in the resumption of daily tasks at home among old friends.

“But even here the pattern of life was changed, for now the man was no longer occupied with his own troubles but was commissioned to tell of the changes God had made in his life. His

orientation was no longer on himself; but on his relationship with God. No wonder that men marveled at the transformation.”

That’s what it’s all about, isn’t it? *Transformation...* from focus on self and tribe and self-preservation and certainty about old prejudices into new ways of thinking and acting. New ways of experiencing our radical connection with one another, with our planet and with God. Ways that *don’t* include preventing ordinations or denying the authority of a bishop.

Another writer has this to say: “I believe that the real difference in the American church is not between conservatives and liberals, fundamentalists and charismatics, or Republicans and Democrats. The real difference is between the aware and unaware.”

What is it that we need to be aware of? We need to be aware of the love of God for *all* God’s children. We need to be aware of the gifts God has given us, and of the responsibility we have in using them wisely. We need to be aware of the preciousness of life, and the limited time we have to love.

Whatever demons assail us, let us break through the barriers that recklessly divide us and finally, as a people and as a church – and, with the help of Jesus – “come to our right mind” – and a new way of life.