

# “Making Distinctions”

Sundays of Pentecost

Luke 8:26-39

June 20, 2010

In our church here we have many categories or descriptions regarding the members. We have business people and teachers, people who travel for work and those who work in the home. We have young people and old people, male and female, married, divorced, widowed, and single. There are those who are very active in the life of this church and those who are not active at all. These kinds of distinctions help to understand who we are as a church. But as with all distinctions, they can be used to separate, divide, and alienate one person from another.

When I was in grade school we played a lot of kick ball at recess. When choosing teams the good players were picked first and the poor players were picked last. A distinction was made. As we get older the games we play of making distinction, of dividing, or alienating one another do not change except in their sophistication. We use excuses like “it’s not my thing”, or “I am liberal and not conservative”, or perhaps “I am spiritual and not religious,” as a way to not get involved, display any real concern, or even to place less value or importance on another human being. We all do this to one degree or another.

Some distinctions are good. I do not want a pedophile or drug dealer in my neighborhood. I am not going to serve alcohol to those who have an addiction to alcohol. I believe sometimes distinctions are necessary and worth making. When it comes to work performance, care for the poor or powerless any distinction that identifies those who are hard and trusted workers are good to make. Even distinctions about making friends who are trustworthy, honorable verses those who are not are to be considered. I can accept these distinctions. But what about the Church, the Body of Christ? Are we to make distinctions among Christ’s Body?

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul is addressing people who were different from his religion and religious tradition. The Galatians were Gentiles (non-Jewish). In Paul’s day that was quite a distinction. It would be similar to African American/white; Christian/Roman Catholic. The Jews of Paul’s day were exclusive, separatists, people not wanting anything to do with non-Jews. They believed that Gentiles were not and did not belong to the Kingdom of God. And the Jews believed that they were justified in their judgment and prejudice. After all the Jews were the chosen people of God and asked by God to remain separate and distinct from all others.

What this meant was that any thought to steps taken to combine or unite these two groups would be seen as being unfaithful to God. God called them, separated them, and made the conditions by which they would live out their calling. And yet Paul, a faithful Jewish leader, a Pharisee, seemed to take another tact. Paul spoke of being inclusive and accepting. Unity was preferred over division. Paul spoke of what it means to be one body in Christ (Are not we all members of the same body...). His argument was that what God had accomplished in Jesus removes the barriers that divide, no longer are we to make distinctions that separate, and any reference to ethnic background that alienates is to

be dismissed. There are to be no more distinctions in the body of Christ. There is to be neither Jew nor Greek; slave nor free; neither male nor female, all are one in Christ Jesus.

That which stood as a barrier, the law, has been removed by grace (undeserved love). The law, that is, excused before God due to performance is no longer the means by which we justify ourselves. For the Jews the law (the Torah) was their identity and heritage. No longer did they who possessed them find these to be the basis and foundation to belong to the Kingdom of God. And no longer was it true that those who did not possess them did not belong to the Kingdom of God.

We are surrounded by evidence of the same exclusiveness of Paul's day. We exclude on the basis of religion (Catholic vs. protestant; spiritual vs. religious); active verses inactive, and homosexual verses heterosexual. We still use distinctions to justify our being exclusive and judgmental.

It is our heritage as Lutherans to speak well of grace (undeserved love), and we do. Yet the practice of our belief in everyday life tends to fall short of such a notion. We limit who can receive grace based on what they have or have not done.

It's like a woman walking on the beach with her son when a large wave crashes down upon them and takes her son away. She stands with arms folded and demands God to return her son. She waits and eventually another large wave comes and washes her son ashore. She looks at her son and then looks up at God and says, "He had a hat!"

We sometimes place unfair demands on God and each other by an ethic of performance. We demand someone to live according to our values before we include them in our circle of friends. We forget that if performance were the criteria you and I would not be counted among the faithful. Who are we to look at someone's life and resent them for being in the church simply because we did not like how they had acted or talked or even believed. Isn't that God's right?

Paul is not advocating irresponsibility or not having accountability when it comes to our personal behavior. If we were to read chapters 5 and 6 of Galatians we would know this isn't the case. Paul places a high regard on obedience and service to God as well as to one another. Paul speaks of not taking God's grace for granted. To excuse ourselves before God, to stand blameless never falls on what we have done, can do, or what we believe. To be excused or justified always finds its power in what God has accomplished in and through Jesus and him alone!

All who believe are saved. All! Non-Jews as well as Jews, women, children, lepers, and sinners were welcome. For us it means people of color, people whose language is other than English, old, young, gay, and straight are welcome. It means we are welcome.

God moves among us to help us to recognize that we are here, confessing faith because of grace. God moves among us to remind us that because of what Jesus did in God's kingdom there is neither male nor female, slave nor free, Jew or Greek. We are all one body in Christ, inclusive by God's grace.

AMEN