

Galatians 2:15-21 “An Argument Against Tolerance”

Tolerance. Bah! Every time you turn on the television or radio or read the news you've got people calling for “tolerance.” What a load of hooey. “Tolerance this ... tolerance that.” “Oh, we need to be more tolerant.” I saw a cartoon a while ago with a bunch of people standing in a crowd holding signs with different slogans calling for more tolerance. One guy whispers to a woman standing next to him: “You know what I absolutely cannot stand? Intolerant people.” Let me say something ... and I know this isn't going to go over very well with a lot of folks. And it's not going to be easy to hear either ... but what the heck, I'm on a roll, right? Here we go: “We don't need any more tolerance.” There. I said it. We don't need any more tolerance.

Honestly ... think about it for a minute. What does the word even mean? In what context do you most often hear the word “tolerance?” Maybe when you talk about a couple whose been together for 40 years and they really hate each other you might say, “I don't know why they're still together ... they barely *tolerate* each other.” Well, hey ... they're practicing tolerance, right? Isn't that a good thing? I mean that's the message we get day after day after day ... “practice tolerance!” Somehow we've accepted this idea that tolerance is a great virtue, but that's not true at all! It's *not* a great virtue. Even when we talk about it as a reasonable goal, we're missing the mark. When you're talking about tolerance, you're really talking about some pretty low standards. See, it's not enough to just tolerate people. In fact, we need to need people who are not like us. And only when we do that can we have the sort of unity that Paul is talking about in his letter to the churches in Galatia. Now of course, this is easier said than done.

Our regional minister, Toni Bynum had a great sermon last week at Katy's ordination service about our unity in Christ and how hard that is to achieve because of ... them. You know ... *them*. “They.” Whatever or whoever is not *us*. There are so many things that polarize us. But polarization isn't unique to this day and age is it? This was happening

with the first generation of Christians ... the earliest church. Paul and the other Apostles that we read about in the New Testament spent a lot of time and energy addressing the things that polarized people in the early church. Most of the issues had to do with conflicts between the Hebrews and the Hellenists ... or to put it in other terms, those who practiced traditional Jewish customs versus those who practiced Greek customs. The early church dealt with a *lot* of “us vs. them” issues. You had conflicts between folks who practiced speaking in tongues versus those who didn’t. People who strictly followed Jewish dietary customs versus those who didn’t. There were differences in philosophy about how to deal with and care for the poor. There were differences of opinion between people whose religious life centered around the synagogue or the temple versus those whose religious life centered in the marketplace or people’s homes. The list goes on. And to be honest, it wasn’t that much different than it is today. Some of what was happening back in Paul’s time was a phenomenon that psychologists call, “Motive Asymmetry.” That’s when one group of people assume that their ideology is based on love, while the other’s ideology (whoever that may be) is based on hate. And it may not surprise you to know that this phenomenon runs pretty rampant in our culture today.

A lot of folks are walking around saying, “You know, my ideology ... my religion ... is based on basic benevolence. I want to help people! I want to do good! But those other people? They’re evil. They’re out to destroy me.” You can’t progress as a community when you have this kind of asymmetry. It’s impossible. Talk about irreconcilable differences! This is at the heart of so many religious conflicts in the world today, particularly between Palestine and Israel. “We’ll never come together,” right? Wrong! Because that diversity ... that ability for Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, males and females to find unity in Christ is what made the church strong in the first century, and makes the church strong today in the 21st century. It’s the most powerful, visible witness to the reconciling work of God through Jesus Christ in the fragmented world we live in. In fact, the church’s *absence* of a powerful, united, visible witness is one of the top reasons why people

choose *not* to be a part of a church community. We are the butt of some cruel but well-deserved jokes. Like comedian Emo Philipps and his visit to San Francisco back in the 80s. Emo was walking across the Golden Gate Bridge when he saw this woman who was about to jump over the rail. “Wait!” he said, “Why would you do this?” The woman said, “Because I feel all alone in the universe.” He said, “But you’re forgetting about God.” The woman said, “Do you even know there’s a God?” Emo said, “Of course there’s a God!” She said, “I used to believe in God.” “That’s good. Were you a Christian or a Jew?” “I was a Christian.” “Me too! Protestant or Catholic?” “Protestant.” “Me too! What denomination?” She said, “Baptist.” “Oh, me too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?” “Northern Baptist.” “Me too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Progressive Baptist?” “Northern Conservative Baptist.” “Me too! Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist, or Northern Conservative Reformed Baptist?” She said, “Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist.” “Me too! Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Eastern Region?” “Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region.” “Me too! Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879 or Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?” She said, “Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lake Region Council of 1912” to which Emo said, “Die Heretic!” and pushed her off the bridge.

We ... need ... each ... other. Part of this, for sure, is a moral decision, but part of it is practical too. And here’s the thing ... you’ve got to take things personally if you’re going to understand the nature of needing other people. And you might say, “What do you mean by that? I thought you *weren’t* supposed to take things personally!” I mean, I’ve lost count of all the people just this week who’ve told me, “You’ve *got* to stop taking things so personally, Jesse!” But you’ve *got to* if you’re talking about needing people. You need your sister in law? Yeah! You do. You don’t want to banish her to another country and never see her again. (You don’t know my sister-in-law, right?) But listen ... you may

disagree with her choice of spouse. Or you may disagree with her politics. Or you may disagree with the choices she makes. Maybe she's that person in the family that smokes like a chimney or doesn't wear deodorant, or whatever it is that grates at your nerves. Once we start taking it personally about people who aren't like us then we'll understand about the nature of what it is to need other people.

Think about the times in your life when "getting personal" helped you change your worldview. We recognize our need for one another through contact. We see people differently when we experience them as people and not "concepts." So someone's son or daughter marries someone from another "tribe." Or a family member all of a sudden has a debilitating disability ... and all of a sudden, your heart grows to encompass a different way of seeing this person. For example, we may have not given much thought about handicap accessibility before, but when you or another family member gets put in that situation, all of a sudden it's personal. It's real.

Next month we'll start Vacation Bible School. The theme has to do with the fruit of the spirit ... the virtues that Paul lists in chapter 5 of Galatians ... this book we're in right now. Paul's talking about love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control. This is the fruit ... this is the good stuff that comes from living in the Spirit. The presence of these fruits is how we know when we're doing it right. "You and your sneak previews, Jesse ... can't you just stick to the text we have in front of us now?" I am. The thing is, it's all related. This whole letter that Paul wrote to the churches in Galatia deals with this idea of unity in Christ and what that looks and feels like. How *do* we journey beyond just tolerating one another and move towards loving one another and being united in Christ? *How do we know* we're even on the right path? According to Paul, you test the spirit. Is there a spirit of idolatry like we talked about last week? A spirit of envy? Strife? The absence of a moral or spiritual center? Greed? Caring only about your own needs? Anger? Dissentions? Factions? Those things can't even coexist with the presence of the Spirit of Christ. Those things come out

of “I” they come out of the “me” that insists that “my” way is the only way and is thus the only way that matters or counts. But when we reach a point in our journey when, like Paul, we can say, “It is no longer *I* that lives, but *Christ* who lives in me,” we’ll start to see the world and the people who live in this world in a much different light.

So stop being so tolerant! When Christ lives and dwells in you, we transcend tolerance and begin being one body in Christ.

Let’s pray.