

“Training Wheels”

Pastor Jan Shannon

June 19, 2016

Scripture:

Galatians 3:23-29 (CEB)

23 Before faith came, we were guarded under the Law, locked up until faith that was coming would be revealed, 24 so that the Law became our custodian until Christ so that we might be made righteous by faith. 25 But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian. 26 You are all God’s children through faith in Christ Jesus. 27 All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 Now if you belong to Christ, then indeed you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to the promise.

The Sermon:

“For you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

My community was targeted last Sunday. My community was injured. My community was killed. My community... I identify with several communities. I am a woman, a Christian, a military veteran, a lesbian, a pastor. These are "my people" my communities, my labels.

What are your labels?

Why do I choose to label myself? Wouldn't it be better if we lost all the labels? Can't we all be one? Yes, we can all be one, even if we are not all the same.

In this verse, Paul is not negating the groups, he is just saying that being a member of this group or that group need not separate us from each other. No, Paul draws distinctions between people – he allows that these distinctions matter, but that we shouldn't let our differences keep us apart. In Christ, all are one. By faith in Christ, all are made one body.

With our labels often come a set of instructions. The party platform, if you will, of whatever group we align ourselves with. For these first century folks that the Apostle Paul is writing to, being a Jew came with a set of instructions called The Law. There were rules about

what you could eat, what you could wear, who you could marry, and even rules about who you could talk to or do business with. Do this, don't do that.

These rules kept them safe. Safe from public shame, religious discipline, and familial rejection. *These rules are starting to sound kind of familiar.* And everyone knew what the rules were and what the consequences of breaking the rules would be.

The Law served as a pedagogue; child-tender, a person, whose duty it was to attend to the children at their play, lead them to and from school, and exercise a constant superintendence over their conduct and safety.

I want to liken the Christian life to learning to ride a bike. In my scenario, the Law is represented by the training wheels. You all know how training wheels work; when you first put them on a little kid's bike, you lower them all the way down the brackets so the training wheels sit firmly on the ground. There's practically no way a child could fall off a bike with the training wheels all the way down. That's what it's like to live by the law. Safe and secure in the knowledge that we have got the right answer, we toddle along on our little bike with the training wheels, our hardline ideologies, holding us up.

So, back to those labels I mentioned before. Have you thought about what your label is?

It was tempting for me to write a bunch of possible labels down, and list them for you, but that's only going to get me in trouble and let you off the hook.

What are your labels?

- Who's your community?
- Your group?
- Your team?

What happens when I'm wearing a label of the opposing side? A group that makes your blood boil. A community you wish didn't exist?

Will you still love me if my label is diametrically opposed to yours?

Because that's the problem. The problem occurs when my group opposes your group. When my ideology is at odds with yours. How are we supposed to be "one" when we can't even get along?

We cannot allow our differences to separate us. The polarization going on in America right now is toxic and destructive. We may think we have the right answers, that our way is the right way to live and everyone else ought to follow it, too, but that's living by the Law. We can't wall ourselves off from each other and expect this thing we call 'living life together' to work. And we can't just blame them. If only they would do it our way...

Trying to live in a binary of right and wrong – I am right and you are wrong - is only going to continue to separate us from each other, when unity is what we are called to.

In order to learn about our distinctive communities, so that we can get along, we are going to have to listen more than we speak. We are going to have to ask questions and be ready to listen to the answers, and not just listen so we can get our next argument ready. This is how we raise the training wheels up, and this is when things get wobbly. Learning about the 'other' by educating ourselves can help us learn to tolerate opposing ideologies, but it can't teach us to love them.

When you are teaching a child to ride a bike, and it is time to take off those training wheels, you say, "Don't look down! Look up!" My advice to my kids was to pick a point ahead of them and keep looking at that. We can do that by following Jesus. Hebrews 12:1-2 says, "So then let's also run the race that is laid out in front of us, and fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. He endured the cross, ignoring the shame, for the sake of the joy that was laid out in front of him, and sat down at the right side of God's throne." Jesus, our brother and friend, is our example.

The only way we are going to learn to love our neighbor as our self, is to follow the example of Jesus. Jesus who told us to forgive not seven times, but "70 times 7." Jesus who taught us to pray by saying, "and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Jesus who looked down from the Cross and said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Can we love those whose beliefs and behaviors are diametrically opposed to ours?

Can we forgive those who hurt us?

When you are teaching a kid to ride a bike without training wheels, we often say, "Don't stop! Keep pedaling!" Friends, this path we are on, this Christian life, is hard. Learning to love our enemies can even be scary, because it requires that we set aside our need to be right, and make ourselves vulnerable in doing so.

A good friend of mine, who some of you know, Skyler Oberst, said to me the other night. "As Christians we often prioritize being right over being compassionate."

It's not often that I take notes while chatting with a friend, but that phrase resonated with me this week. "As Christians we often prioritize being right over being compassionate."

You all know who I mean when I say the Spokane Street Preachers, right? The loud, angry group that protests at the PRIDE parade every year and has visited us here at Westminster? Well, I'm going to go out on a limb here and say that I'm pretty sure their behavior is not what God has in mind for us Christians. I'm pretty sure that Westminster's message of God's inclusive love is right and their message of hate is wrong. But just because I think I'm right doesn't mean I can treat them badly. As much as I would love to stick rotten eggs in their way-too-loud

megaphones, I can't. Jesus said I have to love my enemies, and pray for those who persecute me.

First Corinthians 13:4-7 says, "Love is patient, love is kind, it isn't jealous, it doesn't brag, it isn't arrogant, it isn't rude, it doesn't seek its own advantage, it isn't irritable, it doesn't keep a record of complaints, it isn't happy with injustice, but it is happy with the truth." Darn it. Pretty sure that God would consider rotten eggs "rude."

Even though their ideology, and their hateful words, are the complete opposite of what I believe Christianity is all about, and even though they hate me and the rest of the LGBTQ community so much that they have made threats against us, I don't get to hate them in return.

The ideology that breeds homophobia is ramping up. The situation in Orlando, this horrible massacre, belies any sense. At the vigil last Sunday night, one young man asked me "Why?" Why did this happen? He wanted me to make sense of it for him. Will there be justice? How can there be when the shooter is dead? I told that young man that we may never know why, but we can find some good, even in this dark time. Where is God in this? Where can we find good in all this bad?

I see God in the stories of heroism that we are now hearing about.

Imran Yousuf, a bouncer at the Pulse nightclub, and a former Marine, was able to use his training to quickly identify the impending threat and remain clear-headed. Because of the 24-year-old's decisive actions, he is being credited with saving dozens of lives.

Other heroes include the 14 police and sheriff's department officers who ran into the club, risking their own lives to save others, and Joshua, a young nursing student who saved Rodney Sumter's life by dragging him to safety and bandaging his wounds. We won't ever know all of the stories, but I believe that God was there in ways we cannot know.

While the media and the politicians are spreading fear and hatred, we need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, follow His example of love and forgiveness in the face of hate, and bring soothing words of peace whenever we can. It is in this way that we will become, as our text says, "Abraham's descendants - heirs according to the promise."

And what was the promise to Abraham? That God "will make your name respected, and you will be a blessing."

We have to love across our differences, and forgive in the face of hatred. This is advanced Christianity, really it is. But if we want that feeling of freedom, freedom from hatred and resentment towards others, that wind in the hair, speeding down the hills, kind of feeling, we are going to have to take the training wheels off and follow Jesus example. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."