

In Christ, there is no East or West ...or is there?

Galatians 3:23-29 and Psalm 148

“We have been clothed in Christ.” We have been freed through God’s gift of faith and are seeking to follow Jesus. We need not abide by any special rules to deserve God’s love, forgiveness and spiritual gifts. Let me repeat that: (I don’t know if you need to hear it twice, but I sometimes do) We need not abide by any special rules to deserve God’s love, forgiveness and spiritual gifts. We also have the opportunity as followers of Jesus, if we seek to do so, to become part of communities of faith, where we practice living out this Christian freedom and this Christian unity. These places can be called churches, parishes, congregations. Some of them are chat rooms on the internet connecting people from all over the world.

What these communities can do is give us ways of living that we can practice and people with whom to practice them. We receive accountability partners. We receive a diverse circle which expands our understanding of what God meant when God said, ‘It is good,’ because God said that every day of creation, not just one. The other gift of Christian community is that we can share our resources together and, as always, gifts shared end up being more than the some of their parts and we can share them with our community’s neediest people in whatever area the need finds itself.

The amazing thing is we can do all that in community without the requirement that we all love the same hymns, or that we all enjoy the same food at fellowship time or enjoy fellowship time at all. You can be part of this congregation if you partake in one committee or no committee. You don’t even need to agree on what Lord’s Prayer translation or paraphrase we use! God adopted you through faith and you are free to follow the Spirit’s guidance as long as you remember that that means sometimes you will be challenged because the Spirit is wider than we can ever imagine.

Last month I stepped foot on a continent I had never stepped on before. I was not there for long. Okay it was 8 hours, but still - it was Asia! According to my ancestors, even as shortly back as my grandmother, that is the other side of the whole world. It was a great privilege to have the time and the resources to travel so far and to spend the day in another country which is full of other cultures and to be in the midst of an ancient city called Ephesus. God has been worshipped in Ephesus for centuries upon centuries, sometimes in the form of Artemis, sometimes in the form of

Sophia, sometimes, in the name of Jesus. On the back of today's bulletin, you will see one gate, incomplete, that was the gate to a temple, a temple to one face of God. And behind that you will see a hill and that is one of the hills that Paul preached on. That hill is where a new face of God was exposed to this city with so many faces of God around them.

Ephesus, which is now in Turkey, is literally as well as culturally the cross-roads of the East and the West. There are signs of worship there that point to Christ, others that point to Allah, and there are Jewish menorahs carved into the rocks of many temples. The divide, and the difference in cultures, was very tangible.

When in Turkey, we were offered a time to be in the home of a family that made rugs. And when it came time for hospitality and welcome, two very fancy trays were circulated around the room. On one of those were small glasses of a beautiful rich red wine, on the other beautiful small glasses of a rich grape juice. It happens that about a week before I had been at a Greek farm that was very hospitable, however, when we arrived the fancy silver tray held Ouzo, their liqueur, and those of us who wished not to have Ouzo were asked to go basically into the kitchen and get ourselves a glass of water. And before you think I am maligning the Greeks, that happens in Slave Lake, Alberta. That happens in Spiritwood, Saskatchewan. That really just happens in a lot of places. And so, I was struck by differences. Imagine living in a country where you not only knew some people didn't drink, but you ensured there was a fancy glass of something for everyone.

I have also worshipped in a wonderful community, up in Slave Lake, that always had three, not two, three glasses on their Communion table. Two of them were for intinction, one with juice and one with wine. The people who worshipped there were United or Anglican or Catholic or Ukrainian Orthodox or Lutheran. And then there were people there who had no idea what they were because they had just found us and had a seat. The third cup was of wine as well and it was for folk, usually from the Anglican tradition, who wished to drink instead of doing intinction and they didn't want to drink bits of bread out of the intinction cup.

And then we got a new bishop. 'Bishop' is the title for a particular role in the church; the ones who have oversight. And our new Anglican bishop came and said, "this is all wrong. Christ unites us as one so there must be one cup to symbolize that and you must all drink from the one cup." And I didn't know him very well; I probably should have started with a very serious response. Instead I said, "Oh, do you think God is breakable? Do you think that God cannot hear my worship if I put grape juice on my tongue instead of wine? Do you think the Holy Spirit can't bring spirit to grape juice as well as spirits?" Let's just say it took a while for him and me to understand each other and it took the elders of our congregation (the young and old people who had been elected to the Board) to help him understand that we were united and free and that it didn't matter how many glasses there were on the table, it mattered that all were served communion.

Remembering that God is not breakable is one of the aspects of my call. It is one of the reasons why I love ecumenical ministries because there I can be surprised at what I think is right: Oh we can't do it that way. "Oh, really Leigh," I have been told, "do you think God is breakable?"

Over the last few weeks we have invited you as a congregation - and we will again today - to use a paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer. It has been a little controversial and that is okay because what many of us have realized is that while we didn't know it, we have a heart language in which we say the Lord's Prayer.

Your heart language may mean that you like the one in Mark or the one in Matthew (they are different). You may be someone who learned in 1952 from a sacred elder at your church (those ones we call Sunday school teachers, but they were our elders) and you have always used that version. For some of you, a moment of trauma or change in your life invited you to change one of the words or phrases, either by reading another paraphrase or just one day having it spontaneously come to you. Yet others of you became Christian this year and so either in membership class or in worship you found what was for you, your heart Lord's Prayer.

It is part of our experience to pray to God in different ways and to have heart versions. No matter what language, translation, paraphrase or scriptures you use when you pray the Lord's Prayer you are praising God's name. You are crying out for justice that God's reign is done on Earth and not only in Heaven. You are begging that today, at least for today, you have the bread and the water and the courage you need. You pray that you will have enough faith; that when you hear God forgives you, you will believe that God forgives you and that you will have the courage to offer that forgiveness to someone else.

When I was in Quebec, I tried very hard to not only read but memorize the Lord's Prayer in Quebecois which was difficult since my church was trying to teach me it in French (yes, those are two different languages even though they are both the same language). But often halfway through I would begin praying instead of thinking. This would mean that I would slip back in to my heart version, which is English.

But then I began to realize that praying was more powerful when I knew God was hearing the prayer in French and in English and in Quebecois. And so, we want to invite you yes, to try out new words and old words to the Lord's Prayer. And over this year we are going to pull the Lord's Prayer out of scripture and out of United Church resources and other resources so we can see how many translations and paraphrases there are. We invite you to try at least one of them and be uncomfortable and ponder. And we also hope that there will be moments where you slip out of your brain and into your heart and you pray in the language of your heart so that there will be more than one translation, language and version prayed. I have worshipped here knowing that around me people's heart languages are English and French, Spanish and Mandarin, Cantonese and Cree and many, many more. It is when all our heart voices mingle that we can experience God's diversity and unity.

In a country like Canada, where we all have our own cultures and backgrounds, let us find ways to open our hearts and our doors to people who not only speak or look different than us, but act different, have different needs and pray the Lord's Prayer even in *that* version of it. You have been adopted by God. You are a beloved child of God and that makes us all kin. Thanks be to God.