

Randall D Koehler

Hutterthal Mennonite Church

3 January 2021

Galatians 3:26-28

We're All in This Together

Good morning, Hutterthal Mennonite Church! It is truly an honor and blessing to be here with you all this morning as your pastor, friend, and fellow traveler on this faith journey.

Growing up in rural Illinois, I attended a small public school not far from my childhood home. Morgan and I lived two miles apart, she in town and I north of town. When I say town, though, I mean Benson, a little village of 450 or 500 people, depending on which side of town that you drove in from. Morgan and I went to Junior high and high school together. I spent my elementary years at home, learning from my mother and a staunchly conservative Christian homeschool curriculum. Halfway through my fifth-grade school year, I joined my public-school classmates. Morgan and I both played sports, sang in the choir, played in the concert and marching bands, and participated in high school musical productions, including *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* our sophomore year and *The Music Man* our senior year.

In the middle of our sophomore year just before our first musical, Disney's cable TV channel released *High School Musical*. The soundtrack and film became very popular, leading to two later sequels on Disney channel and a lot of other commercial products. Some of you have probably heard of *High School Musical*, or even participated in a production of it. At the end of the film when all of the dust has settled, the final song is called "We're all in this Together," so of course, when I told Morgan the title for my sermon, she laughed at me and told me that it was

cheesy, given that it reminded us both of this particular movie. Against my spouse's suggestion and probably better judgment, I chose this title anyway. 😊

Humor and cheesy titles aside, though, I mean seriously that we are all in this together! This being the attempt of a community of people called Hutterthal Mennonite Church to discern and follow the way of Jesus in our confusing, hostile, and broken world. Attempting to put the people around us into particular camps, groups, or identities comes quite naturally to us. Our brains function in this way, wanting to categorize the information that we receive throughout our daily lives, but it can also be dangerous. People become labels rather than human beings. We want to know who is on our side in the moment that we disagree or come into conflict. These ways of thinking and evaluating our world can quickly become the polarized ways that politicians and media personalities speak about each other. Suddenly our enemies become people in our own church or community. We can accidentally begin believing a voice over the radio waves or cable tv broadcasts more than a flesh and blood body and voice sitting in the pew six feet from us. Our trust in each other waivers as we question each other's motives and decisions.

I do not know Hutterthal well enough to say that this polarization is a problem at Hutterthal, but I do know that our broader American culture wars are playing out here in southeast South Dakota as much as we wish they were not. Our present polarization is not new to the church either. The Galatian church or churches in the first century knew these feelings and thoughts quite well.

They had received the gospel from Paul and experienced the affirmation of the Spirit's presence in a visible, observable way. In their experience, God had confirmed to Paul his mission of reaching the gentiles and affirmed the inclusion of all people in the kingdom that Jesus had inaugurated, by filling those believers with the spirit upon their faith and trust in Jesus. After

Paul had left this church or churches, though, to continue on his missionary journeys, Christian Jewish missionaries visited these churches, teaching that right standing with God required more than what they had heard from Paul, causing much confusion and division. These later missionaries taught these new Galatian converts that they must also become ethnically and physically Jewish alongside their belief in Jesus as Messiah and Savior in order to become Christians. Some male converts soon got circumcised and started following the teachings of the mosaic law in addition to what they had heard from Paul. The bulk of what these later missionaries would have taught is in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. These teachings or what Paul calls the works of the law were meant to show the true and right way of relating to God in God's world, setting the example for all of the other nations what being in relationship or covenant with God looked like before Jesus came.

Paul realized after his conversion that Jesus had fulfilled all of the requirements of God's covenant with Israel through his life, death, and resurrection. Jesus's faithfulness and example accomplished right standing with God for all people for all time. These thoughts had been confirmed for Paul not only through the work that he was doing among the Gentiles but also by the apostles in Jerusalem, including Peter, James, and John who had blessed Paul in his mission to those outside of the Jewish nation (remember the dream that Peter had early in the book of Acts about eating clean and unclean kinds of food). The dividing line between the Jewish people and everyone else was broken down in and through the person of Jesus. When Paul hears from people in these Galatian churches what is happening, he is furious, which you come to realize as you read the entire book of Galatians. Paul cannot believe that the new converts have already begun to question their own experience of God and the spirit, thinking that they needed

something else in addition to their commitment to Jesus the Messiah and his way of life summed up in love for God and neighbor.

But this all should sound familiar to us. How often have we heard even in the last year that we have not gotten the full story, not only about COVID-19? Our media atmosphere is filled with conflicting stories or the latest “expert” who has another reason or story for why we can’t believe what we have been told previously. Who can we believe when things seem so unclear, confusing, and downright frustrating? From wearing masks to whether the presidential election was stolen or rigged to how we conduct our Sunday morning worship services, it seems like nothing can be separated from the us vs. them of our time.

We have found ourselves questioning our neighbors and teachers just as the Galatian churches did to Paul. We have to remember though that Jesus is our one true source of hope and peace, and he calls us and leads us as a community of faith toward loving one another with patience and trust. We bear with each other’s fears and uncertainties. We walk alongside each other, asking how things are going and praying for each other, attempting to understand our fellow church member’s point of view before we jump to conclusions about who belongs to what camp or particular way of thinking. We are all in this together! Our commitment to each other super-cedes the stories from the outside that seek to thwart and disrupt our relationships.

Turn to Galatians chapter 3, verse 26 if you do not have it open already. If you are using a pew bible, it is on page 616. Paul writes, “for in Christ Jesus, you are all children of God through faith. As many of you were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” We are all members of God’s family, children of our heavenly father or mother whichever brings you more comfort. We are included in this story because Jesus provided for and showed us the way to right and good relationship with God. Baptism confirms our commitment to the way of

Jesus and symbolically renews and clothes us with Christ, the living water. As members of God's family, we may argue, fight, bicker, or complain. We may not like each other in certain moments and we may disagree about any number of theological or practical ideas, but just as the Galatians were called to remember the gospel that had transformed their lives, we are also called again to love God and our neighbors no matter who tries to fool us into an alternative. We must cling to the peace, hope, and love that Jesus has offered us.

When we are tempted to walk away out of frustration and anger, we choose to stay and keep walking forward. When we are tempted to insult and put other people down because they are not like us or disagree with us, we choose humility and service, doing our best to listen and empathize. We choose our family, our fellow brothers and sisters, children of the living God alongside us who are walking this journey with us.

In verse 28 of Galatians 3, Paul then reminds the Galatians and us that Jesus has broken down all of the dividing lines that perpetuate injustice or violence or bigotry or hate or judgment in our world: Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female, republican or democrat, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, blue collar or white collar, pro-mask or anti-mask, town folk or country folk, diligent or apathetic, child or parent, short or tall, older or younger, millennial, Gen X, baby boomers, or Gen Z. As I said in the beginning, we naturally categorize and organize the world around us, but the faithful work of Jesus in our world has informed all of those labels. We are all equal children of God, one in the body of Jesus, carrying on the mission that Jesus started 2000 years ago, the inbreaking Kingdom of God. What Jesus has done and continues to do to our world has not abolished these labels or disregarded their meaning, it has transformed how we think about them and requires us as his followers to do better. We claim those labels that apply to us, but we do not allow them to define us because we are now defined by the faithfulness of

Jesus as God's children. We also no longer allow them to shape the ways that we see our neighbors and family members. If we are more than the labels applied to us, then our neighbors also are more than what we have labelled them.

What is most interesting about the book of Galatians is that even in the midst of Paul's frustration with these churches, his concern is not merely for right belief as if the Galatians only need to claim the right set of words or creeds to guard against the infiltration of these teachers who are distorting the gospel. Paul later warns them in chapter 5 that they must love each other because if they choose instead to bite and devour one another, they might consume each other. Do our current political and cultural battles feel a little bit like we are biting or attempting to devour each other? We know when our community is working together in the best possible ways because Paul tells the Galatians after this warning in chapter 5 that they will know when the fruit of the spirit is present because there will be love and joy and peace, patience and kindness and faith, gentleness and self-control. In this prolonged experience with COVID-19, are you finding more of the fruit of the spirit, or are you finding something else? Let us strive for a church community transformed by the spirit and filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control.

Though we will try to think beyond our labels, they will continue to haunt us like ghosts in the corner of the room, attempting to convince us that we do not need the people that are not like us. We will struggle with thinking beyond our labels, especially when the world around us wants us to simplify those not like us. We will struggle with relating to those that are different than we are or those that think differently than we do, but we remember that we are all in this together. Again, I say we are all in this together!

So, we walk forward together into this New Year committed to each other and to the one who called us into his kingdom of hope. I bring this sermon to a close with the third verse of “In Christ there is no East or West,” one of the hymns that Amy selected for our service this morning. Listen to these words, soak them in, and let us follow Jesus together.

Join hands, then, people of the faith, whatever your race may be.

All children of the living God are surely kin to me.