

## Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Luke 8:26-39

Galatians 3:23-29

### VALUED

Think about what makes you, you. I'm going to give you twenty seconds. Some of you felt like that twenty seconds was a long time and others probably thought it was way too short a time to begin to consider what I asked, which is part of what demonstrates that we are different from one another. When we talk about identity, many of us think about our physical traits - gender, height, body type, racial and ethnic identity, and physical abilities. We also may think about our experiences and how they have shaped us, our relationships, including our family of origin or who we consider to be our family now. Some think about passions and interests. Some focus on beliefs and aspirations. Some consider where they grew up and their educational experiences. Then there are the type of tastes in food and entertainment, as well as what kind of sense of humor we have. Others focus on style and attitudes. Some focus on level of health or on economic class. Particularly in an election year, some focus on political associations.

How many of you were born over a thousand miles from here? How many of you were the second child in your family of origin? How many are fathers? How many have good memories of your fathers? How many were raised Presbyterian? How many are left-handed? What kind of questions do we ask about others to determine whether they are like us or not? Which of those qualities were beyond their choice?

One of our readings today came from part of an almost 2000 year old letter written to Christians in Galatia, the central part of what is called Turkey today. The writer was someone who had been given the name Saul at birth. For much of his life, he approached his religious life understanding that it was to be a way to shape and control behavior. Certain people were put into identity groups by where they were born, their gender, and their economic status. Religion was for telling them what to believe and how to live. If they did not toe the line, then perhaps some punishment to get them to conform made sense. The history and practices of religion that oppress and coerce, that manipulate and control people are way too long. It is little wonder that people who see or experience religion in this way often run from it when they can get free of it. For much of his religious life, this Saul, who was a Jew, participated in this kind of understanding of religion. He thought he knew what was right; he dedicated his mind and heart to it. He felt called to be a religious leader, and he persecuted people who did not believe or act like he did.

But then this Saul was converted by another Jew, named Jesus, to something radically different - a life grounded in God's love and grace. It changed him so thoroughly that he was called Paul after that. His belief system and his actions changed from the inside out. He began to experience God not as a force to make people behave in certain prescribed ways, but as a loving presence who could free people to be whom they were created to be. This conversion was a glorious experience for him and he dedicated himself to telling others about the possibilities of this kind of relational life in service to God. He helped establish churches in the region of Galatia. But then a few years later, Paul learned that some of the religious people from the old school had come into those churches. They were trying to take the people back to the old ways of duty, oppression, of controlling and keeping people in their place. They were herding all these freedom-loving Christians back into the corral of religious rules and regulations. As a result, the churches were about to split apart. Paul was none too happy with the old guard for coming in with their strong-arm tactics of intimidating the Christians to give up their free life in

Christ. And he was a bit exasperated at his Christian sisters and brothers who caved in to that intimidation, forgetting much of what he had taught them.

The old guard was dedicated to splitting people up by their identities, whether they were of Jewish or Greek origin, whether they were female or male, whether they were slaves or free people in the economic system. Paul declared that none of those things determined whether they were loved by God. Such things were part of the identity of those individuals, but none of those categories beyond their control could take away the identity of being a beloved child of God.

God didn't create the diversity of humanity by accident. So we have a choice about how to view that diversity – whether God intended that those with particular characteristics were to dominate people with different characteristics or whether God created a glorious mosaic of peoples to enrich the experience of all. I think it is clear which of those alternative visions is favored in scripture.

There are some ways in which our society has seen progress in terms of tolerance of differences. But in other ways, there has actually been regression. There is growing racial segregation in communities and schools across much of our land. There is greater disparity in wealth by racial categories than there was just a few years ago. Poor children continue to be stuck in poor schools. Many law enforcement agencies and systems of justice have been shown as deeply biased in carrying out their duties. Work force and salary discrimination by gender and sexual orientation continues in many places across our land. Many are using the differences of people in this land to try to drive us apart from one another. That is part of the context in which this congregation exists.

So it is important that this congregation and the church of which we are a part show not only tolerance of, but love for the diversity of people within and beyond us. God created that glorious diversity as part of what is intended to enrich our human experience. The General Assembly is the highest council of our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It began its every-two-years meeting yesterday, this time in Portland, Oregon. For the first time in 222 General Assemblies across the years, co-moderators of the assembly were allowed to be elected and they were. Denise Anderson and Jan Edmiston were elected to the highest office in our denomination. Denise is pastor of Unity Presbyterian Church in Temple Hills, Maryland, a part of our presbytery. She is part of the lectionary bible study group with which I meet most weeks and is the youngest person ever elected to serve as moderator. Jan is the former pastor of Fairlington Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, also within our presbytery, but she now serves in Chicago Presbytery. Denise is African American. Jan is Caucasian. They are richly and differently gifted and I am confident they will serve the church well in their two-year term. They are not the first women and Denise is not the first person of color to serve in this capacity, but their election is a reminder of our passage from Galatians that was actually used in their installation as co-moderators last night where Paul writes: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Each one of us in our uniqueness is loved and valued by God. That level of divine acceptance gives us a foundation on which to continue to build a ministry that celebrates the wonder and richness of the diverse humanity that has been created in God's image. To be able to receive that gift of diversity as a gift from God is a quality that our society and our world desperately needs. We are witnesses of and witnesses to human diversity as a gift. Think now about what makes Warner, Warner. I hope and pray that we will grow in our diversity-embracing identity as that is part of what God needs the church to be in our society and world today.