

**John 3:16-17**

**Galatians 3:19 - 4:7**

**September 25, 2022**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

**THE CROSS-SHAPED LIFE**  
**“All in the Family”**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

*Boy the way Glenn Miller played,  
songs that made the hit parade  
Guys like me we had it made,  
Those were the days.*

If you are of a certain age, you immediately think of Archie and Edith Bunker singing at the spinet piano in their living room in Queens, New York. “All in the Family” debuted on Tuesday night, January 12, 1971. The first episode didn’t bode well for the show that was like nothing anyone had ever seen on TV. Only about 15% of the TV viewing audience tuned in that night. In fact, the first season wasn’t a total success, but, after that, the rest is history. “All in the Family” was the #1 rated show for five years in a row.

Here’s how one history of “All in the Family” describes the groundbreaking show: “The sitcom followed an ordinary family in Astoria, Queens. But unlike other families of the time, the Bunkers were dysfunctional and didn’t always get along. Additionally, the show covered weighty topics that didn’t always have clear answers. The show covered things like racism, abortion, women’s rights, politics, and thoughts on war as well. The network even decided to run the show with a disclaimer at the time, lest it shock unprepared audiences.”<sup>1</sup> And, of course, there was the main character, Archie Bunker, who was “an outspoken, narrow-minded man, seemingly prejudiced against everyone who is not like him or his idea of how people should be.”<sup>2</sup>

The sermon title “All in the Family” was inspired by two things. First, there is Paul’s affirmation in Galatians 4:6-7, “And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir through God.” In other words, because of God’s promise which has been fulfilled in his Son, when we put our faith in Jesus Christ, we discover that we are “all in the family.” Or, in the words of Rev. David Walker in his sermon to the Presbytery of Coastal Carolina many years ago, “If God is our Father, then you are my family.” That’s a wonderfully hopeful idea, but being in a family can bring its own set of challenges. . .

. . . which brings me to the second inspiration for today’s sermon title. When “All in the Family” premiered in January 1971, again, as the TV history puts it, “The country had better get ready for Archie Bunker. The character was unlike any other on

television. And 'All in the Family' was unlike any other sitcom for its time. It helped revolutionize TV as a whole."<sup>3</sup> TV viewers had never seen anything like it. In the setting of a sitcom, the show confronted the major divisions of the day (many of which remain the major divisions 50 years later).

When the apostle Paul wrote to the Galatian Christians in the mid-50's of the first century A.D., he was addressing the challenges of what it meant for Jews and Gentiles who confessed faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior to be "all in the family." The apostle Paul helped revolutionize the social structure of these bands of diverse believers. So, as a practical application of what their faith in Jesus Christ meant in everyday life, Paul would write, "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." (Galatians 3:28) Obviously, Paul didn't really think that once you professed faith in Jesus Christ, you literally no longer were a Jew or a Gentile, a slave or a free person, a male or a female. What Paul did mean was that any and every conceivable barrier or distinction that can isolate believers one from another has been torn down as a result of Jesus's death on the cross. As one commentator puts it, "The most profound differences between people known to Paul, like the differences between people known to us, are nothing compared to the power of Christ to reconcile all things – Christ who has with God made one body out of an infinitely varied tapestry of believers. . . Paul says that Christ alone matters: Christ our unity, Christ our focus, Christ the line of energy along which relationships run, Christ the beginning and the end, Christ the cause for which we live, Christ from which nothing can take us, not even death – especially not death."<sup>4</sup>

At each monthly session meeting, your elders and I spend time in worship, Bible study, and conversation about what it means and how to be better spiritual leaders for our congregation. Last Tuesday night, Greg read Ephesians 2:11-22, in which we find these verses that sound a lot like what Paul wrote to the Galatians: "For [Christ Jesus] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it." (Ephesians 2:14-16)

Then we read and discussed an article by Rev. Julie Coffman Hester from the Presbytery of Western North Carolina about one of the ordination questions our elders answer when being ordained and installed. The question asks, "Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world?" I remember one of our elders years ago asking about "working for the reconciliation of the world," "How are we supposed to do that?" Of course, that's the key question, isn't it? And we have to begin in the church.

We had a thorough and heart-felt discussion about the article, especially this portion in which she writes, "No matter when you read this, people of faith will be disagreeing passionately about matters fundamental to our lives. Pick any hot-button

issue and people on all sides may talk about how their faith as a Christian led them to their viewpoint. We may wonder, 'How can they call themselves a follower of Jesus and believe *that*?' We are divided by politics, race, economics, gender, ideology, and more. We can't agree on how to read the biblical texts we hold most sacred. We don't agree on what truth is. We don't listen to the same experts or hear the same news, and none of us are without our own bias. What would Jesus have us do? . . . The ordination question for this month asks if we will seek to follow Jesus, love our neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world, not just within the church walls and roles and gatherings but *in our own lives*, every day. The question hands us a new set of lenses to polish and put on — Jesus, love, reconciliation. This may sound to some like bias, but really, it is the gospel. It's what you have signed up for as a leader in the church."<sup>5</sup> Of course, living out that gospel of Jesus, love, and reconciliation in a cross-shaped life isn't **just** for your elders and your minister. It is the way of life for all of us in the family.

Mark Twain recognized more than one hundred years ago that, "humor is tragedy plus time." The tragedy of division in the church due to adding ANYTHING to faith in Jesus Christ is really no laughing matter, but there is an old joke that reveals just how dangerous it is when we use our faith and especially our traditions and ways of doing things to decide "who is in and who is out" of the family of God. [CAUTIONARY NOTE: This joke uses "Baptists" but you could easily substitute just about any other Christian denomination.] One day a man saw a guy about to jump off a bridge. He said, "Don't do it!" and the other guy said, "Nobody loves me." The first man said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?" He said, "Yes. "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian.""Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant.""Me, too! What franchise?" He said, "Baptist.""Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist.""Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist.""Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region.""Me, too!" Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." The first man said, "Die, heretic!" and pushed him over the side of the bridge.

It's uncomfortably funny because it's all too true, isn't it? Paul encouraged and challenged the Galatian believers to live into their oneness in Christ in a culture and societal structure that was defined by Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. Today we would say Protestant or Catholic, Mainline or Evangelical, Conservative or Liberal, Red or Blue, rich or poor, straight or gay, white or of color . . . and the list goes on and on and on. The question from Tuesday night's session discussion that really hits home is one that the apostle Paul might very well have asked of the Galatian Christians: "Will we seek to follow Jesus, love our neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the

world, not just within the church walls and roles and gatherings but *in our own lives*, every day?"

You may be more familiar with Habitat for Humanity than with Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia. Millard Fuller was inspired by his time at Koinonia Farm and went on to found Habitat for Humanity. The farm's website says, "Since our founding in 1942, we have welcomed and shared with anyone and everyone regardless of race, religion, no religion, background or anything else that divides people. We are an Intentional Christian community with a rich history."<sup>6</sup> Koinonia Farm was founded by Baptist minister Clarence Jordan as a peanut farm which he tried to run as "he thought Jesus would run it." He welcomed all people – including black and white – to come to the farm and work. To understate the obvious, in rural Georgia in the 1940's and 1950's, his local Baptist Church did not agree with what he was doing.

Here's a story from Koinonia Farm that perfectly illustrates the danger in the church that the apostle Paul was warning against. One time, an agricultural student from Florida State University visited Koinonia Farm for the weekend. The student was from India, and said, "I've never gone to a Christian worship service. I would like to go." Clarence took him to Rehoboth Baptist Church, and it is reported that "the presence of his dark skin miraculously chilled the hot, humid southern Georgia atmosphere." It didn't matter that he was from India. He had dark skin and so he did not fit in. After worship, the pastor drove out to Jordan's farm and said, "You can't come with somebody like that. It causes disunity in our church." Jordan tried to explain, but the pastor wasn't listening.

Sometime later, a group of church leaders went out to the farm to plead with Clarence to keep undesirable people out of their church. As the story goes, Clarence promised to apologize before the congregation if somebody could prove he had done something wrong. Then he handed a Bible to a man in the group and said, "Can you tell me what sin I have committed by bringing a stranger to church?" The man slammed down the book and said, "Don't give me any of this Bible stuff!" Clarence retorted, "I'm not giving you any Bible stuff. I'm asking you to give it to me." The man and the others did not know what to say, so they slipped out. When they got back to the church, they wrote a letter and said, "Mr. Jordan, you are no longer welcome in our church, because you keep bringing in the wrong kind of people."

The gospel says when we separate ourselves from one another according to this standard or that tradition and lose our focus on Jesus Christ -- Christ our unity, Christ our focus, Christ the line of energy along which relationships run, Christ the beginning and the end, Christ the cause for which we live, Christ from which nothing can take us, not even death – then we will inevitably and tragically see those "other" people as "the wrong kind of people."

But when we keep our focus on Jesus Christ, when we trust the promise of God, when we respond faithfully to the call to live the cross-shaped life, then we will come to know that we are God's children, heirs through God, and we are "all in the family."

***Let us pray: God of our lives, by the power of your Holy Spirit we have been drawn together by one baptism into one faith, serving one Lord and Savior. Do not let us tear away from one another through division or hard argument. Remember, Lord, your one holy catholic and apostolic church, redeemed by the blood your Christ. Reveal its unity, guard its faith, and preserve it in peace. Amen.***

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Matthew Wilson, “‘All in the Family’ Originally Went By a Different Name,” March 18, 2021 at [www.outsider.com](http://www.outsider.com).

<sup>2</sup>*All in the Family* at [www.en.wikipedia.org](http://www.en.wikipedia.org).

<sup>3</sup>Matthew Wilson, ‘All in the Family.’

<sup>4</sup>Carol E. Holtz-Martin, “Galatians 3:23-29: Homiletical Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 3*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, pp. 163, 165.

<sup>5</sup>Julie Coffman Hester, “Seeing Clearly – Question F,” July 15, 2022 in *Regarding Ruling Elders: A Monthly Series for Serving Faithfully* at [www.pcusa.org](http://www.pcusa.org).

<sup>6</sup>[www.koinoniafarm.org](http://www.koinoniafarm.org)