

*All*

First Congregational Church Branford  
Galatians 3:23-28; June 16, 2019  
Father's Day  
Rev. Suzanne Personette

Paul's letter to the Galatians contains important information about the beginnings of the church. He writes:

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. <sup>24</sup>Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. <sup>25</sup>But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, <sup>26</sup>for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. <sup>27</sup>As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup>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.

I thank our heavenly Father for fathers in the church, whether they have born a child or not. A church father is one who helps watch over, nurture, provide, mentor and protect. I give thanks for the strong fathering exhibited in your church, of our mens' desire to live out their faith. They seek God's guidance, *and realize*, it is not weakness but strength to need and call upon heavenly help at home, work, church, and play. Real men ask for help! *And*, real men cry!

Okay, onto Galatia.

Jerusalem's early church was in crisis. Should they admit Gentiles (non-Jews) into their fellowship? Could Gentiles be believers? Resolution of these questions didn't come easily, but finally the Jews swallowed their pride and begrudgingly allowed the gentile outsiders to come into the fold. Their guidelines seemed fair enough: all the new converts had to do was to be circumcised!, and follow the laws of Judaism.

But, Paul wrote a letter to the Galatians. He told the Jerusalem Christians that their welcome didn't go far enough. He insisted the Gentiles didn't have to subscribe to all the Jewish regulations. All they had to do was be baptized and proclaim Jesus as Lord. It was a new day! Even these non-Jews were children of God - with no strings attached.

Paul told these early Christians that all the old categories they'd followed of ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic divisions they'd followed all their lives were too confining. The Jewish Christians persisted: don't tell us that *gender*

differentiations don't matter. Paul said they don't! What he said next was scandalous!: *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.* They noted his emphasis on *all* - and they weren't too happy about it.

Upon reading this Galatians passage, Halford Luccock, a popular Preaching professor, observed that the hardest words to learn in any language were never the long words but the short words. The Galatians had no trouble pronouncing the long, ponderous words: circumcision, disciplinarian or barbarians. But they stumbled and stuttered over the little words: faith, grace, baptism and especially *all*. We *still* stumble over those words! We *still* have divisions along ethnic, religious, socioeconomic and gender lines. *All* are one in Christ.

I was reading about a journey of a minister in another denomination who said when he started preaching over 40 years ago, things at his little rural church were fairly calm except for some empty pews, a large heating bill and an irate member or two. He spent most of his time on the big words like God's love and the amazing power of grace. One day he took a drive and witnessed real poverty. While he was busy trying to fill the pews with *respectable* people, some of those poor tenant farmers and their noisy children walked in on a Sunday morning and sat in the second pew!, and he found himself turning from the seemingly important words to one little word... *all*. It took a long time for everyone to become more inclusive. But, they got there. They got there.

Things eventually settled down until three of the church's youth came back as teenagers and stood up and asked: "What are you going to do about the Vietnam War and the draft?" The minister learned that when you open your doors to *all*, you're going to get some hard questions like that.

After dealing with poverty and a troublesome war, the minister moved on to another church, where soon after, someone stood up and asked, "Why don't women serve as deacons in this church?" This issue took a lot of time and a lot of meetings, but when it was over they had women deacons, and even ordained two women into the ministry. But, the local association got wind of this heresy and withdrew fellowship from their church... The minister was beginning to learn that sometimes *all* is a very hard thing for the church to say.

The minister moved on to a church that included difficult meetings with fundamentalists who wanted to know if he believed every word of the Bible was literally true... He grew to accept that fundamentalists are *all*, too.

The minister moved to another parish and one Sunday a man with AIDS walked into his new church and sat in the second row. A few weeks later several gay men and women asked to become members. There were countless meetings and angry members. They lost their biggest givers! But, eventually, the church said *all* loud and clear.

When retirement came, the minister believed that most of his battles were over, but he started serving as an interim minister! In his first position, a week after the September 11 tragedy, a dark-skinned man met him at the back door after the service. He said he was a Muslim, and he wanted to know if the minister's God hated Muslims. Many Christian churches have a hard time unpacking that question.

The minister took a second interim, where battle lines were clearly drawn between Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives. He came to understand that the march was going to go on and on. Paul's words to Galatia keep upsetting every generation: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for *all* of you are one in Christ...." *All*.

The minister closed the article by saying, "We Christians might as well tighten our seat belts. When we least expect it, our settled worship will be interrupted by something. Illegal immigrants, global warming, health care, a war with no end. I guarantee someone will come in and sit in the second row and their name will be all."

FCC, as you celebrate your 375th anniversary, let's lift up in recent history times the church said all: you said it to children - you became involved in the foundation of the Mandana Armstrong Nursery School which became the Child Development Center; you said *all* and you helped found the Branford Interfaith Housing and built the affordable housing on North Ivy; you were instrumental in the foundation of the Branford Counseling Center, then the Branford Soup Cellar, which is now the Community Dining Room; you said *all* and you founded Wakeman Hall which was a school and program for kids with substance abuse problems; members *saw* veterans and founded Take a Vet fishing. In the midst of the hysteria and fear around HIV, you said *all* and church members created Camp Totokket for children whose lives were being affected by the illness, and you founded Adopta Una Familia, a mission that improves housing in Ecuador.

I wonder, who next is going to sit in the second row whose name will be *all* and inspire you to *make Christ's love known in word and action*? What cause will you tap into - maybe gay rights, maybe race relations. I don't know.

I *do* know the season of Pentecost is a growing season!

And that *someone's* coming to that second pew.... or, someone's already here that needs to be noticed. I guarantee there's an *all* whooshing its way here.

I wonder...what will the 400th anniversary of your church lift up about you, this congregation?...

Amen.