

**GOOD NEWS, CONTINUED**  
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*Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. 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. Galatians 3:23-28*

Two years ago, almost to the day, I stood in this very spot and offered a message with the somewhat cheeky title “Good News.” It was, after all, the Sunday immediately following Randy’s retirement after his long and fruitful years as the pastor of this community.

What I wanted most to do that day was remind us all, including myself, that 43 years is a long time in human terms, but its barely blip for the Spirit. That in fact, the Spirit called this community into being some 276 years ago, now, and has been at work here, in us and among us all along.

Among other things, I said this: “As Randy was fond of pointing out, our story *actually* began some 4.3 billion years ago when that same Spirit first moved over primordial chaos, bathed it in light, and brought forth new life. Its what the Spirit does. So: our history is long, and it will continue. And, every one of us here, and all those out there touched in some way by this beloved community, is invited to be part of what comes next, to keep shaping and being shaped by our life together, by the Spirit of Love that called it all into being and makes it all possible, year by year, day by day, and breath by breath by breath.”

And you know, reflecting on all this, as I prepared for this Sunday, the week after our interim pastor’s retirement, I’m struck by how true this all is still, today. **And**, looking back at where we were then, I am also so inspired to see more clearly, just how far we have come.

And—when I hear people saying, “well here we are back in the wilderness” I just want to shout -- **we never left it!** Not if by “wilderness” we mean being on a journey into the unknown. Which is, by the way, just another name for “life in the Spirit.” Or, simply, life. Change, transformation, evolution is built into the very structure of reality. And our tradition teaches that the driving force underneath it all is Love, this irrepressible power always drawing us forward, moving us toward greater connection, consciousness, and compassion. That Love is always present, seeking our attention, inviting openness, praying for our willingness to receive and be changed in relationship—with each other, with the world, and with our deepest selves.

This is why listening is such an important practice. Over these last couple years, we’ve engaged a great deal of intentional listening together. It has helped us deepen our awareness of that Love, at work in us and among us. We have spent countless hours in hundreds of conversations, as we’ve worked together to articulate something about who we are and what we value. This is how we named our core commitments as a community (our trees) —Engaged Compassion, Holistic Spirituality and Radical

Hospitality. And these in turn shaped our identity statement, which names who we believe we are, and who we desire to become—which is now on our bulletins, by the way, just in case we forget. This kind of reflection, this naming and claiming, is a powerful spiritual practice—individually as well as communally. It helps us understand more fully where we've been, where we are and where we may be headed next. And let's be clear—pastor or no pastor, this was and is *our* work, *our* collective, communal response to the Spirit's invitation to us, in this particular moment of transition. And, this will continue on, undoubtedly in new and unexpected ways when our new pastor joins us on this ever unfolding adventure.

As long as we keep listening for and with the Spirit, as long as we keep choosing to receive and respond, we will continue becoming something new. Each and every time a new person walks through those doors, or into our lives, we have the potential to become something new. Every time we open ourselves to the perspective of another, we are invited to move toward a new wholeness.

Which brings me back to “radical hospitality.” Because I think hospitality as an act is something we understand really well—it is, in fact, a particular gift of this congregation. But hospitality is also an attitude, an intention, a way of moving through the world, and with openness and trust. And while that qualifier “radical” often makes us think in political terms—welcoming the outcast, perhaps—it also implies simply “utter, total and complete.” *Choosing welcome* with no conditions. And, that word radical comes from the Latin word for “root.” So radical hospitality implies both wide open **and** deeply rooted. And the taproot of that radical hospitality is the claim that everyone and everything belongs.

This is pretty much what Paul is so emphatically proclaiming in his letter to the Galatian churches in our reading today. It is in fact, a summary of Paul's entire project, this assurance that *in Christ*, which is to say, *in the community of the Beloved*, there can be no division, no exclusion, no conditions, no levels of belonging. Everyone and everything is *invited* to belong—not that everyone will always agree, but, rather that all are invited to the table, always.

Paul here is pretty much shouting, NO! (all caps!) to the particular divisions of his time and place. **No** Jew or Greek, no slave or free, no male and female. In our world, he would surely add: no black or white, gay or straight, cisgender or transgender, immigrant or citizen, no believer or unbeliever, no older timer or newcomer—all are one in the Beloved.

This is Paul's version of “good news”—the claim that God is love, and everyone and everything is included in that love. And, *this* “good news”—gospel—was around long before there were any actual written gospel accounts. It's easy to forget that Paul's letters are actually the oldest documents included in the New Testament canon—by decades. And Galatians is thought to be the second oldest of them all. So, this is the very earliest “good news” *and it is already under attack*. In this reading, Paul is addressing the bitter divisions that arose in those very earliest Jesus communities, and this is Paul at his cranked up crankiest. Galatians is the only Pauline letter that does not include a thanksgiving as part of the greeting—Paul is not thankful here, and he is not gonna fake it. In the equivalent of a first century rage tweet, Paul suggests that the troublemakers should just go castrate themselves. He calls the Galatians foolish and bewitched, accuses them of desertion, and charges them with perverting the good news. *Radical hospitality does not mean that anything goes*. Those who would divide, those who would exclude actually exclude themselves.

Richard Rohr in his new book *The Universal Christ* suggests that Paul was, in fact, obsessed with this notion of universal wholeness, with Christ as its central symbol. While Paul never actually encountered the human Jesus, he clearly had a profound and transformative encounter with the risen Christ, one that changed everything from his inside out. And from that moment on for Paul, as written in the book of Colossians, there can be “only Christ. Christ is everything and is in everything.”

Rohr points out that Paul’s distinctive refrain “en Christo” (in Christ) is repeated some 164 times in the Pauline letters. It is, Rohr suggests, Paul’s shorthand for “the gracious, participatory” (which is to say communal) “experience of salvation, the path that he so urgently wanted to share with the world. Succinctly put, this identity means *humanity has never been separate from God*—unless and except **by its own negative choice**. All of us, without exception, are living inside of a cosmic identity, already in place, that is driving and guiding us forward. We are all en Cristo, willingly or unwillingly, happily or unhappily, consciously or unconsciously.”

This is an important book, and your Adult Education and Formation Committee is excited to offer it for our next Sunday seminar series beginning this fall. And there is a lot to work with here—in addition to the book itself, there is a fabulous series of essays and a 12-part podcast called “Another Name for Everything.” Rich food for the journey ahead; let the banquet begin!

And look, I know this particular leg of the journey seems awfully long. But, if 43 years is just a blip for the Spirit, two is barely a breath. And believe me, I know there have been some unexpected and disappointing twists and turns. I know there is still grief about what we’ve left behind, and fear about what lies up ahead. And I know, when things don’t unfold in our lives exactly as we hope and expect, the temptation is great to allow anxiety, fear and division to enter in. Everything, everywhere is so divisive these days.

But, as Paul reminds the Galatians, “in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith,” or we might say: Trust! you are all God’s Beloved. Trust in the fundamental good news that *God is love and those who abide in love abide in God*. Trust that good news continues. Trust this next leg of the journey—welcoming again the mysterious work of the Spirit who is always with us, moving over chaos, bringing life out of death, always birthing something new. Trusting the journey, means trusting that Spirit, and I hope, trusting each other. We are in this together, and we have already come a very long way. There are so many new and fruitful things emerging here in spite of, or maybe precisely because of where we are, right now. We are all “in Christ” where everyone and everything belongs. If we belong to God, we belong to each other, and we belong to the world. And, friends, the world needs some good news right about now. May we keep finding ways to see it, to trust it, and to be that good news. Amen