

*Based on Galatians 3:27-28. Baptism Beyond Binaries*

It is a stunning reversal from the Paul we think we know: the one who is quoted in his letter to the Corinthians as telling women to keep silence in the churches; the one whose condemnation of idolatry in his letter to the Romans is misinterpreted to condemn faithful and loving same gender relationships.

In Galatians we get a dramatically different picture. Here, in this earliest recorded vision of the meaning of baptism we find Paul collapsing gender and ethnic and economic hierarchy, inviting instead a hope for a new humanity in Christ that transcends the ways in which we currently divide ourselves according to who is sufficient and who is deficient.

Binaries do that, you see. As much as binaries make it easier for us to make sense of a chaotic world, they also force us to mark good versus bad, male versus female, gay versus straight, Republican versus Democrat, MAGA versus *woke*, white versus black, sick versus well.

Complexity is harder. It is more chaotic, but it is also more honest.

It turns out, if we are honest, very few things in this life can be divided exclusively into one or the other of our binaries. Even the visual depiction of the *yin* and *yang* binary admits there is no such thing as *all* one or *all* the other. There is at least a little bit of *yin* in the *yang* and at least a little bit of *yang* in the *yin*. I know I personally often do good things for bad reasons and bad things for good reasons. *The road to hell, we have been told, is paved with good intentions*. When it comes to being good or being bad it turns out every one of us is *nonbinary*.

As well, while many of us join a particular political party for very good reasons, I do not know a single person who has not, at some point, thrown up their hands in despair and declared *a pox on both your houses*. And how many of us, even if we are not currently hacking up a lung or nursing a broken bone could actually claim to be *well*? More often than not, the binaries break down, if we are telling the whole truth about ourselves.

Our biological and social identities tell the same story.

A child of a Black parent and a White parent might call themselves Black, or perhaps even White, but many are now opting for a third biracial or multiracial self-description. And then there are intersex and transgender and nonbinary people who disrupt our rigid conceptions of sexual orientation and gender identity. These binaries, for some reason, seem to hit us harder as a society than the others, for reasons I have not yet truly figured out.

(Perhaps I don't want to.)

The bottom line for Paul and for us is that none of that binary business makes sense for the realm of God, into which we have been baptized. All of the other things Paul says in later letters about women and same gender relationships and even slavery and submission to earthly rulers are only reflections of him wrestling with how to live in our current binaried hierarchical FALLEN reality while rigorously preparing for the realm of God to

emerge in its fullness. The actual realm of God, with which we have been *clothed* in our baptism, has none of that binary business.

Today one of our own share us with us how they are learning to live *as if* the nonbinaried nonhierarchical REDEEMED realm of God has already been realized in their baptism. A beloved child of this church, baptized from this font, nurtured within this congregation, will share with us one person's perspective on the nonbinary experience.

You will notice the use of *they/them* pronouns, which may be challenging for many of us who have been taught different pronouns for our sibling in Christ these past many years. It will take us time to shift, and we will make mistakes. That is okay. We simply acknowledge it when we do and then correct it and move on.

I also know that many of us have had a particular kind of grammar drilled into our heads from the times we were children. We were taught *they/them* are exclusively plural pronouns, never to be used them for individual people. Believe me, I get it. I was an English major in college, I know how deep those grammar critic tapes run.

But that was thirty years ago! If Paul can change, then so can we.

Language, like life, is not static. It evolves with us, shaped by us, even as we are shaped by it. If our language is unable to describe our sibling's reality, then we must update our language to include their reality, not sublimate their reality in order to fit into our language.

Because we love our sibling - and more importantly, because *God* loves them - we will do what we have to do to release our inner grammar critic and to transition from the pronouns we have used for them all their life.

As we prepare to hear from them, we gather again around the font and declare: in our baptism we were *clothed with Christ ... there is no longer male and female, for all are one in Christ Jesus!*