

Do You Know Who You Are?

June 12, 2016

Galatians 2:15-21

Margaret Thatcher was the first woman prime minister of Great Britain. She was known as the “Iron Lady”—a description of her determination, grit and courage. She was visiting a care center for the elderly. She went from room to room, greeting the residents.

One woman had no idea that she was shaking hands with the Iron Lady. “Do you know who I am?” Thatcher asked the elderly woman. “No, dearie,” the woman replied, “but I should ask the nurse if I were you. She usually knows.”ⁱ

What really makes us God’s family?

This is not about membership in a social club. This is about the truth of the gospel. The truth of the gospel is “the announcement that the crucified and risen Jesus is Lord of the world. And if he is Lord of the whole world, then those who...give allegiance to him must form a single family.”ⁱⁱ

God’s family is marked first by baptism into Jesus’ death and resurrection. Do you know who you are? If I were you, I would ask Paul today.

Paul speaks for himself and for all believers in Galatians two, verses nineteen and twenty. “*I have been crucified with Christ,*” he declares, “*and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.*”

What really makes us God’s family? It is not biology or ethnicity. It is not membership or longevity. It is not uniformity in thought or behavior. It is our incorporation by baptism into Jesus death and resurrection. The Holy Spirit empowers us in our baptism to live as members of God’s family. “*And the life I now live in the flesh,*” Paul concludes, “*I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*”

God’s family is marked by baptism. And God’s family is marked by fellowship at the Lord’s Table. The communion question is simple. Who is welcome at God’s family table?

In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we practice open communion. In 1997, we adopted a churchwide statement on our sacramental practices called *The Use of the Means of Grace*. This statement is deeply rooted in and subject to the New Testament authority on Baptism and Holy Communion. We rely on that statement to guide our practices of Baptism and Holy Communion.

So, according to this statement, admission to Holy Communion “is by invitation of the Lord, presented through the church to those who are baptized.”ⁱⁱⁱ The invitation to Holy Communion comes from Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is our privilege to be the means by which that invitation is extended.

That invitation is extended to anyone who trusts that Jesus is present for us in, with and under the bread and cup. You need not pass a theology exam before you come up. You don't have to be sorry enough for your sins to qualify. You don't have to possess a complete understanding of the mechanics of Jesus' real presence in the supper. You are invited. So just come.

That's different from some other parts of the Lutheran family. I am sad that communion is not open to Lutherans in some Lutheran congregations. I believe that contradicts Jesus' gracious invitation. I am glad that we can welcome all.

You see, it is the Lord's Table and not just ours. That table is a place where we experience our unity in Christ. So we have communion sharing agreements with the Presbyterian Church USA, the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ, the Episcopal Church USA, the Moravian Church, and the United Methodist Church. We are working on other sharing agreements even as I speak. I rejoice that we express our oneness in Jesus in this way.

Denominations are not a problem as long as we are clear about this. If we recognize one another as members of God's family and welcome each other to our communion tables, the rest of that stuff is beside the point.

What really makes us God's family? What makes us God's family is Baptism into Jesus' death and resurrection and Communion at the Lord's Table. Human divisions have been a challenge to the Church from the beginning. I rejoice that the ELCA has become a more inclusive family of faith.

Racial and economic realities, however, still divide and challenge us. Our call is to extend God's family in spite of those challenges. Our denomination continues to respond to that call with trust and hope.

Next week we will hear more about what it means to be full members of God's family for the sake of the world.

Do you know who you are? Come to the Lord's Table to be reminded and refreshed. Let's pray...

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ⁱ As told by N. T. Wright in *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians*, page 24.

ⁱⁱ Wright, page 16.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Use of the Means of Grace*, Part III, Principle 37..