



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Dannals, *Interim Rector*

Put On Christ

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, June 19, 2016
The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Galatians 3:23-29*

"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 Jesus ... As many of you as were baptized into Christ then put on Christ..."

To write an inspired sentence like that indicates the reception of God's boundless grace and the characteristics of a progressive theologian and an enlightened pastor. And some of us want to shout out—FINALLY! Finally we have an Apostle Paul that does not embarrass us. At times we have to struggle with Paul's seeming indifference to slavery; we have cringed at some of his judgments about the place of women in the church; we have had to put up with his judgmental attitude about sexuality. But now it seems we have a Paul who has turned some corners, he has struggled through a number of tough issues, he has seemingly confronted some of his own demons, and he has come into the light with a comprehensive love known in baptism.

In this text, the Apostle Paul addresses two very important convictions. First, he speaks to the importance of egalitarianism, and secondly to something even more prominent—what it means to "put on Christ," to find our identity from God, beginning for Christians in Baptism.

First, he speaks to the theme of democratic commitment—to treat all people equally. In the Church of Jesus Christ we're called upon to be inclusive, comprehensive, and compassionate toward all. In this text from Galatians Paul seems to be on the right side of history, and we might breathe a sigh of relief: He finally got it right!

But before we become too hard on Paul, wouldn't we have to admit that in our own biography and the world in which we grew up, we had to confront some challenges regarding egalitarianism?

I grew up in a large Episcopal Church in a Southern city. There I was baptized as an infant, I went to Sunday school where I learned the stories of the Bible, and I participated in the sacraments. There I learned about "putting on Christ."

And yet there, in that church, I also learned about "them." I remember well the whispers around the church: Did we have a plan if any of "them" showed up on Sunday morning? Where would we seat "them"?

A few years later, as a counselor in training at a formerly racially segregated YMCA camp, I went to pre-summer orientation. It was a weekend where we gathered for fellowship, singing, Bible study, and preparation.

I got there on Friday afternoon, dragged my duffle bag to my assigned room, and there waiting for me was a fellow counselor in training. He was about my size, about my age, and he was black.

Now, I had made some progress since my childhood days. I knew which words not to use in polite society. I believed in racial progress, but, walking into that room, I was faced with my society in a most personal way.

That evening, after the first training session, we went back to our room. He sat on his bed, and I sat on mine. We began to talk, hesitantly in the beginning. First, we talked about football and baseball. Then we talked about girls — we were both scared of them. We found that we like the same music—Motown. We discussed our faith—he was Baptist, I was an Episcopalian. And we discovered that we were from the same city. But his neighborhood, his

stories, his experiences didn't sound at all like mine; I was stunned by his account!

When the first light dawned, I saw things in a new light; I was changed, at least a little bit. I had begun to "put on Christ." I was becoming an advocate of democratic egalitarianism and an inclusive gospel. And following the tragedy this past week in Orlando, we hope that many more in our world are discovering an inclusive gospel.

But there is another and deeper question the Apostle Paul is raising in the Galatian text: Who and what informs who you are? Whose dreams are you dreaming? What is your essential identity, and where did you get it? And by these questions, you and I are invited to respond to the edict above the Temple in Delphi: "Know Thyself."

But how do we get to know ourselves? It is no easy task. Consider that many of the features by which people gain their identities are motivated by cultural acceptance, perceived sexual orientation, racial heritage, or national pride. Some people need titles or academic degrees or family of origin status to tell them who they are. While sadly still others choose enemies to foster their identity—whites need blacks; Gentiles need Jews, and Jews need Muslims; straights need gays; Democrats need Republicans, etc. Some people need their sins to tell them who they are—the fostering of foibles and failures becomes a lifetime passion for some. Other people find their identity in what they own or to whom they are married or, on this Fathers' Day, with their offspring, while still others find their self-purpose by their level of power and influence, even domination. And then still others find their identity in where they were born or their state or city of origin. You may have heard the old saw: Why do Episcopalians from Charleston, South Carolina not bow at the cross when it comes down the aisle? Because they are still upset that Jesus wasn't born in Charleston. But one grande dame said, "But darlin' he was born in Charleston; the Bible has it wrong!"

And some allow God to tell them who they are. These are people who believe that God's love doesn't seek value; it creates it. Rather than achieving their worth, they receive it as a gift. Rather than trying to prove themselves, they seek only to serve God's world. You can recognize those who find their identity in Jesus by seeking to imitate his life and teachings: they are humble and kind, not jealous or boastful, not arrogant or rude, they do not insist (always) on their own way. They are not motivated by fear but by love, and they seek to live out the baptismal covenant by which they find their unity. They live gratefully and generously, and they are willing to stand up for those who are marginalized, and as they seek peace and reconciliation, they don't roll over and play dead. They confront injustice and resist evil and put boundaries around those who might be violent. And they work for public policy, like reasonable gun control laws that enhance and protect life and don't diminish or destroy life.

So—what do you say? Let's risk joining them, and in so doing live the exciting, purposeful life we've been given. As our Presiding Bishop says, "Let's be 'Crazy Christians.'"

I love the story of Norman. Remember in elementary school when the teacher would announce the spring play? Every student's hand would shoot into the air volunteering to be one of the characters. Of course, the choice characters would be handed out first. Norman's teacher announced the play for the year—Cinderella. Chaos ensued as a sea of arms waved wildly. "I want to be Cinderella!" many girls yelled. "I want to be the handsome prince," shouted the boys. Realizing that not everyone was going to get the leading roles, some kids began announcing their desire to have second choices, like the wicked stepmother or the homely stepsister. In the end, everyone had a part except Norman.

Norman was a quiet boy who didn't talk much in class. Norman had a mind of his own and was perfectly comfortable just being himself.

Concerned because there weren't any characters left, the teacher said to Norman: "All the main parts are taken, what character would you like to be?"

Norman didn't hesitate: "I would like to be the pig."

"Pig?" the teacher said, bewildered. "But there is no pig in Cinderella."

Norman smiled and said, "There is now."

Norman designed his own costume — a paper cup for a nose and pink long underwear with a pipe cleaner tail. Norman's pig followed Cinderella wherever she went and became a mirror of the action on the stage. If Cinderella was happy, the pig was happy; if Cinderella was sad, the pig was forlorn. One look at Norman and you knew the emotion of the moment. At the end of the play, when the handsome prince placed the glass slipper on Cinderella's

foot and the couple hugged and ran off together, Norman went wild with joy, danced around on his hind legs, and broke his silence by barking. In rehearsal, the teacher had tried explaining to Norman that pigs don't bark. But Norman said back, "Oh, this pig barks." And the barking, she had to admit, was well done. Well, the presentation was a smash hit. At the curtain call, guess who received a standing ovation? Of course, Norman, the barking pig. Who was, after all, the REAL Cinderella story.

Norman is so like Jesus. The people had written a script, a self-identity for the Messiah, and it didn't include the teachings and the manner of Jesus. The script did not include a part for the Jesus we find in the Gospels. Messiahs don't hang out with riffraff, people on the margins, the disenfranchised, those left out, those who are hurting, those who have needs. And what's Jesus' reply? "This Messiah does!"

So, my friends, let's put on Christ.

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For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022