

Sermon June 17th on Gal. 3, 23-29

Text: Galatians 3, 23 - 29

„I am somebody, for God makes no junk“ – says a graffiti on a wall in a South African suburb near Cape Town. Above it one sees the faces of two smiling children, one black one white. A strong statement, even a theological one. For all too long the curse of racism, the law of the apartheid legislation had ruled the land. And for all too long this ideology had not only been tacitly tolerated, but openly advocated by churches of the country. From early on until the 80ies especially the Dutch Reformed Church and those in its tradition had supported the Apartheid ideology by quoting the Old Testament only, especially Gen.9: “Cursed be Canaan, a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers.”

My wife and I worked in South Africa in the 80ies and 90ies for almost 10 years. We served in the Indian and Black communities and were horrified to see how everything was separated: townships, schools, hospitals, shops, banks, even the beaches were divided into white, so-called coloured, Indian and black. And to make matters worse, even the churches were divided along racial lines. They had no or little connection with or knowledge of each other; and when they met, they often did not or could not share communion.

The abhorrent regime was no better summarized than by the following declaration from the House Assembly in 1950 which states: “The white man is the master in South Africa, and the white man, from the very nature of his origins, from the very nature of his birth, and from the very nature of his guardianship, will remain master in South Africa to the end” (House of Assembly debates).

So you can well imagine what a subversive power today’s sermon text has had in South Africa, and still has in every place, where oppressive laws occupy people’s hearts and minds. “But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; for in Christ you are all sons of God, through faith.” Paul, although clearly anti-racist, could only acknowledge men to be equal. We are grateful that modern translations have continued the emancipationist tradition that these verses represent, and therefore read “sons and daughters”.

“No longer a custodian”, “there is no difference” - what a wonderful vision of the church that is: everyone has free and equal access, there are no obstacles of ethnic background, of social standing, of gender and language. The Church of the first Pentecost had shown how it should be and Paul applied it to the people in the pews in Galatia. Baptism in Christ thus became not only a confessional, but also an eminently socio-political statement: No longer should there be a dividing wall between the haves and have-nots of the original Covenant of election; but in Christ all these boundaries have lost their power, they are no longer relevant.

In South Africa that could be understood as rebellion, at the risk of prison and even death. May I remind you that 37 years ago yesterday - on June 16th 1976 - the Soweto uprising started. In its cause

more than 500 youth were killed, merely for demonstrating for the right to be taught in their own language instead of the tongue of the oppressor, Afrikaans. I shall never forget the picture of 12-year Hector Peterson, who was shot and carried by an 18-year old, with his distraught sister next to him. It became an icon for me, enshrined in my memory, and it was a touching moment when I visited the Hector Peterson Museum much later in 2008 to hear Hector's now 50 year old sister tell the story of how the death of that little boy lit up and energized a whole generation to fight racism. Until this very day I am so thankful that the Lord let me see two non-violent revolutions that have dramatically changed history: in Germany and South Africa, and to be able to play a small part in at least one of them. The informal settlement of about 8.000 people where we worked in Durban was called "Canaan", the promised land, and although this was no land of milk and honey – without access to water, energy, health services and even security of ownership -, it has now turned into a formal township, and even a small Lutheran congregation has sprung up to serve the community.

Now we could lean back and say: "Well, aren't we glad that this is over! Isn't it great to live in a country of free men and women, with strong constitutional rights and emancipated values!" Yes, we are, and we should cherish the fact that biblical visions have become encoded in the UN charter and in human rights legislation. Yet we should be reminded that racism goes much deeper than legal safeguards can reach; and to fight it one has to work hard to propose a valid alternative. In the words of Nelson Mandela as featured in the Apartheid Museum: "To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that enhances and respects the freedoms of others."

Our true problem lies not outside, but inside the churches. Yes, it's good to walk the streets protesting right-wing extremism in Germany. I am glad that we are doing this more intensely than we have done in the past – next week-end for instance there will be a worship service with several different stations along the road leading to a Neo-Nazi farm near Eschede, with members of many churches from the whole region supporting it. And yes, we are happy that a new initiative has sprung up in the church – for democracy and against right wing extremism in Lower Saxony – it was long overdue!

But we need to take a closer look at our own situation within the churches, too. In the United States there is a saying among black pastors that goes like this: "There is not a single hour in the week that is more segregated than 10 - 11 o'clock on Sunday mornings." As churches we are far from being the just and inclusive communities that Paul had in mind when he wrote to the people of Galatia. We are far from being inclusive in membership, language, ethnic and social background. Even in darkest apartheid times there was a clearer recognition of this fact than I see in some Christian communities until this very day. Many Christians don't even realize that there is anything wrong in an all-white, all-German congregation – that's the way it has always been and always will be, period! This is what of a group of international Church experts that visited Germany on an anti-racism exposure tour in 2010 called the "blind spot"-factor: fighting Nazism in society, but being blind to enmity and prejudice amongst one's own membership.

Experts have a name for it, albeit a difficult one: group-related enmity. It relates to a number of prejudices, from xenophobia, antisemitism, islamophobia, disregard for homosexuals, migrants, homeless, mentally or physically challenged people. 10 years long, from 2001 – 2010, a survey consisting of 5.000 intensive interviews was conducted all over Germany and the result of this long-term study is quite disconcerting: Christians didn't do better in that survey than their secular counterparts, in fact: they did even worse when it came to prejudice against Muslims, migrants and women.

So what can we do about that? The answer is plain and simple: Be what The Gospel intends us to be – an inclusive Church that is not afraid of difference, but cherishes it! A Church that welcomes the stranger, comforts weary, offers refuge to the vulnerable and excluded and proclaims freedom to the bound. A church that opens the eyes of the blind – even in its own midst – to the ills that beset us. We need to do some real soul-searching and agenda-setting in our church activities – for instance to look at doing anti-Bias courses in our men's groups and women league meetings, in supporting inclusive policies in our kindergartens and schools, in celebrating Human Rights Sundays and using every opportunity in the Church Year to love God as well to love our neighbor, as different from us he/she may be!

Sometimes that takes a long time and people are very stubborn at what they are doing! For me a very good example of good practice was what I saw in the Matthäus-Kirche here in Hannover: a great International Christmas Service and Festival which included the whole community, not only on that day, but in preparing for the event, building trust and new contacts along the way. Or the new endeavor of reaching out to churches of other confessional backgrounds and languages to build a new international ecumenical fellowship of Churches in Lower Saxony. Is it all worth it, the struggles, the discussions, the intense controversies within one's own membership? This is a question each one of us has to answer in his/her own heart and context. The vision of Paul certainly encourages us – and if we are listening to our hearts, they mostly likely do, too! Amen.

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