

St. Andrew Presbyterian
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IF YOU ARE CHRIST'S
Galatians 3:23-29

Almost 400 years before Jesus two of the greatest minds of all time spent twenty years together. I am talking about the great Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle. Day after day this teacher and his prized student discussed the deepest issues of their time and indeed all time: What is reality? How do you know what is real? And what will you do about it? To use the technical terms, they were analyzing metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Those three subjects form the bedrock of philosophy. And what Plato and Aristotle discussed is still being discussed.

In fact on Thursday evening at the new Lewis University I was discussing Aristotle with my class on ethics. I noted that Aristotle's Ethics is still one of the most widely read books in all of philosophy. His section on friendship is delightful, and I commend it to you. However, there are some odd ideas in Aristotle, ideas that make him a rather dated figure. Take his ideas about non-Greeks, slaves, and women. In the First Century Aristotle's ideas on these subjects were widely influential, pretty much the majority opinion.

And what did Aristotle think about non-Greeks, slaves, and women? Actually Aristotle called non-Greeks by another name: "barbarians". That's because Greeks looked down upon all other languages but their own. A "barbarian's" tongue sounded to a Greek like "blah, blah, blah"-thus the name "barbarian". Listen to what Aristotle said about these "barbarians": "But among barbarians no distinction is made between women and slaves, because there is no natural ruler among them; they are a community of slaves. Thus the poet said rightly: 'It is good that Greeks should rule over barbarians'."

Thus, barbarians, women, and slaves are lumped together as of little value. Aristotle felt that slaves were like the lower animals that needed to be tamed by their masters for productive service. Aristotle even suggests that slaves are mere bodies to be subjugated by their masters who indeed have real souls.

Aristotle's view of women is closely aligned to his view of slaves. For him, only men have a full capacity for reasoning and thinking, while women have a capacity mainly for childbearing. For Aristotle men and women are fundamentally different. The female is in his mind a kind of

“deformed male”, less than the male in every respect. On this point Aristotle and his teacher disagreed. Plato imagined that some women could someday be philosopher queens ruling alongside men. Aristotle did not buy that for a moment.

Taken together, Aristotle loved being a Greek male who was born free, indeed, a member of the privileged class. For this Greek philosopher, all that seemed very natural, just the way things should be. In Aristotle’s mind, barbarians, slaves, and women need not apply for equal treatment. They are at the bottom of the social ladder and should stay there. That was Aristotle’s view and the view of the vast majority of folks in the First Century. It’s a viewpoint that unfortunately still gets a hearing in parts of our world even to this day.

So when you read Paul’s letter to the Galatians, you realize what an utterly radical view this apostle to the Gentiles held. Paul was not an Aristotelian. Far from it. He was a Jewish Christian committed to spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ. Specifically he was called by Christ to bring the Gospel to Gentiles, folks utterly unlike himself. The truth is that Saul the Pharisee had no doubt looked down upon all non-Jews, just as Aristotle looked down upon all non-Greeks. And he probably had little regard for women and slaves. That was before Saul became Paul the Christian apostle. All that changed for this new person in Christ.

In the Galatian letter Paul makes this absolutely astonishing claim: When you are baptized into Christ, you have clothed yourself with Christ. You have taken on the mantle of Christ, the mindset of Christ, the heart of Christ. So now you are Christ’s. You belong to Christ. You do not belong to yourself anymore. The life you live you now live in the Spirit of Jesus, who loved you and gave himself for you.

That means you feel profoundly different about God. You know you are loved and accepted just as you are. And you feel profoundly different about other people. You are called to love and accept them just as they are. It’s called grace. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who enfolds you with love, warts and all. The grace of our Lord Jesus who calls you to love others unconditionally, warts and all.

In fact, in Christ everybody looks completely different. These are now brothers and sisters for whom Christ died. And thus Paul pens these immortal words: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer males and female; for all of you are one in Christ.” For Aristotle, these words would have been absolute nonsense, sheer lunacy. But that is what Paul believed and that is what he preached. There is a totally new relationship between those who are in Christ. Ethnic distinctions

no longer matter. Economic disparity no longer matters. And gender differences no longer matter. We are one in Christ. No one-no one of which I am aware in the First Century-ever wrote such a thing! Paul's conviction was utterly and completely revolutionary. Aristotle would have rolled over in his grave.

Paul envisioned that the Body of Christ could transcend the ethnic, economic, and gender differences among us. These differences no longer stand between us. These distinctions are no longer deal breakers when it comes to fellowship with one another. We love one another in and through Christ in a way we never could have before. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once so beautifully said, "Christ is our mediator with God and our mediator with one another. There is no relationship that is not mediated by Christ. Christ stands between myself and the other." So I cannot see the Other except through and in Christ.

Perhaps my first real experience of this new reality in Christ happened in the summer of 1966. Coming from Tyler, Texas, deep in the Old South, I grew up in an all white neighborhood, an all white school system, and an all white church. Like Aristotle, I suppose I just assumed that this was "natural", the way things should be. Upon graduation from high school, I spent three months traveling alone about Europe on a Eurail pass. Oh my! The things I saw, the people I met, the experiences I had. Let's just say I have not been quite the same since.

Why? Because I bumped into this amazing truth about human life-we are all so different! I met communists and socialists in East Berlin, Roman Catholic priests in Rome, Hindus in Brussels, Palestinians and Israelis in Switzerland, anti-Viet Nam activists in Hyde Park in London, Mormons in Paris, Gypsies in Luxembourg, and African-American sailors in northern Germany. And not one of these groups of people had I ever really talked to before-talked to as an equal, a fellow traveler, if you will. By the time I got to Geneva, Switzerland, my head was spinning, so much to absorb.

In Geneva I met up with my cousin Arthur Hugh Mathews, who was a religious journalist. He was covering the World Conference of Churches meeting on Church and Society, and he invited me to attend. Not only did I get to hear the famous anthropologist Margaret Mead speak to the conference, I got to experience the international church for the first time. This was a far cry from the church of my youth. People of every color and language and political persuasion and theological stripe were present. And oh my the things they were saying! You remember that this was the high water mark of Liberation Theology, and the anti-colonial movement was in full force. Let's just say my jaw dropped and remained locked in

amazement at the things I heard preachers and teachers and priests and bishops and archbishops say!

In Geneva, my white world of privilege was challenged at a very profound level. All the ethnic, economic, and gender assumptions I ever entertained were called into question. No, that's not quite strong enough. All my prejudices were examined for what they were—a sin before God and a sin before my brothers and sisters for whom Christ died. The World Council of Churches called me to repentance, pure and simple. I stood convicted. I knew I needed to change. For those life-changing three months in Europe I can only thank God a thousand times over.

During May Sharon and I vacationed in the Florida Keys to celebrate 25 years of marriage. We visited a wonderful place called the Key West Butterfly and Nature Conservatory. Perhaps you have been there as well. It is an experiential museum dedicated to the wonder of nature, the butterflies and moths that brighten our planet. As we walked through this rain forest type of environment, butterflies and moths of every imaginable color and form surrounded us. They landed on the leaves and even on our shoulders and heads. It was really quite magical, a world of light and color and life!

I think it is perfectly obvious that our Creator God loves variety, butterflies and moths of every imaginable color and form. Just the sheer plenitude of diversity must give God great joy. There is a lesson for us in the wondrous splash of colors gracing the world of butterflies and moths. There is much to be learned from the brush of butterfly wings. May it be so. Amen.