

We Are All One
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Scripture & Message
Vaughn Sheff
Confirmation Sunday, May 1, 2022

Scripture

Galatians 3: 26–29: ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷ As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Welcome & Introduction

- Good morning!
- My name is Vaughn Sheff, and I’ve led the Confirmation Experience for the last 8 years and I am **privileged & honored** to speak to you all this morning
- It is so great to see y’all this morning!
- Today is so exciting because it is CONFIRMATION SUNDAY
- A culmination & celebration of 3 years of dedication by these amazing youth (Kat, Violette, Nat)
- One of our goals in this experience has always been to **live the mission of OGPC**
- That said, I’d like to reflect for a moment on just one verse (28) from today’s Scripture: *There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*

What Does it Mean?

- So, what does that mean?
- In preparation for today's message, I thought deeply about that question
- To me, that means that no matter where we come from, no matter what we look like, no matter our station in life, no matter our sex or gender...
 - We are **ALL** welcomed by Jesus
 - We are **ALL** equal
 - We are **ALL** valued in the eyes of God
- And it goes beyond that...
 - We are **CALLED** to put that into practice
 - Every day, in every aspect of our lives, no matter where we live & thrive

Individuality, Diversity, Inclusion

- Hmmm... as I think on that verse & consider what is happening across our country today, I can only conclude that message is under attack
- And further, some who claim to be Christians, followers of Christ's words, are leading this attack
- Let's look at a few of these headlines that have increased fears & created massive anxiety (Slide #2)
 - In Florida...ⁱ
 - Bill signed forbidding instruction on sexual orientation & gender identity
 - Kindergarten through third grade

- In Texas...ⁱⁱ
 - The Texas Department of Family & Protective Services has been directed to investigate parents, who allow their children to transition gender, for child abuse
 - In a recent NPR interview, trans children of one Texas family expressed fear they could be ripped away from their parents & placed into foster careⁱⁱⁱ
- And it is not restricted to only Florida and Texas
- There are over a dozen different states that are passing similar anti-LGBTQ bills across the U.S.^{iv}
- Let's consider our own backyard...
 - George Floyd¹
 - In our streets... the streets of Minneapolis
 - George Floyd, slain 5/25/20 for being accused of passing a counterfeit \$20 bill
 - A black man choked to death, his life squeezed from his body, as a police officer kneeled on his neck while 3 other officers assisted & prevented **anyone** from helping him or saving his life
 - Even as George Floyd desperately cried out, "I can't breathe" & pleaded for his life, the officers were unmoved & felt justified in their actions
 - Philando Castile^v
 - In St Anthony, a black man shot to death by an officer during a routine traffic stop
 - Despite complying with every & all of the orders of the officer, Philando was gunned down as he reached for his driver's license, again to comply with the officers' instructions

¹ <https://www.change.org/p/mayor-jacob-frey-justice-for-george-floyd>

- The officer claimed he felt he was in danger
 - These are only a few examples
 - Encourage you to visit Oasis for Youth room in the lower level of OGPC
 - The walls are, sadly, filled with names of other people of color, killed because they looked different
- Our natural reaction, when such events occur, is to ask how & why could such terrible things happen
 - We often look to our past, and as a historian, I know that our current world is the result of & shaped by past events
 - So, it is natural that we'd examine our own country's history to understand what motivates these individuals
 - And the evolution of the social, economic, political environment that make it possible
 - What events may've helped shaped these opinions?
 - From where does this inequity stem?
 - Has it always been this way? Or is this something new?
 - But even trying to understand our own **HISTORY** is under attack
 - There are efforts to cloud, distort, and even **outlaw** what teachers may instruct in their classrooms
 - The reasoning---it may make students feel uncomfortable or create a sense of guilt among our youth^{vi}
 - So even if we wanted to understand from where this fear, racism, injustice originates, some would seek to prevent us from doing so

My Reaction

- As I reflected on all this, I grew
 - **Anxious** for the world our youth must navigate
 - **Fearful** for the dangers they may face
 - **Angry** at those who would seek to persecute those who they see as “different”
- I wanted to strike out at those & was filled with rage
- I wanted to attack those who would dare harm MY KIDS
- As I thought about Kat, Violette, Nat I was filled with dread knowing that some out there may seek to harm them because they view them as “different” from themselves
- I was in crisis & unsure how to reconcile my emotions—I felt unbalanced
- BUT---there was good news!
- The answer was right in front of me: Confirmation!

Learnings from Confirmation & Following Jesus (Slide #3)

- We constantly discussed these same challenging topics during our youth program
- We regularly charted a path, based on the teachings of Jesus & the core beliefs of OGPC, on what to do when we encounter intolerance & hate
 - We do not attack others even in the face of hate, but instead extend & show the power/value of love
 - We do not numb our minds to the lessons of history, but instead celebrate education & embrace compassion to understand our past, respect the lives of others, their journeys, to gain a better perspective

- We do not persecute others who we see as different, but instead celebrate our diversity & our own unique GIFTS for those are fruits from which we can all be nourished
- And when it gets too much for any one of us to handle alone, we know we can rely on our fellow youth & leaders as sources of strength & support!

Action Statement

- Part of the Confirmation Experience is to draft a Faith Action Statement (FAS).
- I wouldn't be much of a teacher if I didn't do the work myself, right?!!!
- So here is my FAS & commitment to the Confirmands: I will...
 - ...be a steady supporting “shoulder” for you **whenever you need help**
 - ...be a resource for you when you are **overwhelmed**
 - ...be a source of safety for you when you are **under attack, scared or fearful**
- To congregation
 - **I'd like to ask the congregation, now, this morning to do the same**
 - Will you be a supportive adult for these youth in times of need? If so, loudly declare “I will”
 - Will you be a source of strength when our youth are feeling weak?
 - Will you be a source of safety when our youth are under attack?
 - Will you embrace & accept our youth, no matter how they choose to identify?

- Angelic voices in the Choir...will you sing the praises of our youth & celebrate their gifts? If so, sing “We will!”
- Halleluiah! Amen!

Other Notes

- The Galatians, a Celtic group that moved from southern France to Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), were an important component in the geopolitics of Anatolia in the middle and late Hellenistic Period. Originally from Gaul, the Galatians were some of the main participants in the Great Celtic Migration in 279 BCE with other Gallic tribes.
- Romans conquered it in 64 BCE, province established in 25 BCE, Paul founded churches 46–48 CE.
- Based on letters from Apostle Paul to Galatian communities.

ⁱ <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/28/1089221657/dont-say-gay-florida-desantis>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/01/us/texas-child-abuse-trans-youth.html>; <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-politics-and-policy/texas-governor-calls-citizens-report-parents-transgender-kids-abuse-rcna17455>; <https://www.click2houston.com/news/local/2022/03/02/8-year-old-transgender-activist-invited-to-state-of-the-union/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/1087529009>

^{iv} <https://freedomforallamericans.org/legislative-tracker/anti-lgbtq-bills/>

^v <https://www.vox.com/2016/7/7/12116288/minnesota-police-shooting-philando-castile-falcon-heights-video>

^{vi} <https://www.npr.org/2022/02/03/1077878538/legislation-restricts-what-teachers-can-discuss>