

**“Especially For You”
Galatians 6:1-10**

This passage from Paul’s letter to the church in Galatia reads like disconnected pieces of practical advice. Some of the verses may sound familiar to you even though you weren’t quite sure where they came from: **“Bear one another’s burdens;” “You reap whatever you sow;”** and **“Let us not grow weary in doing what is right.”**

One that has always intrigued me is verse 10, the last sentence in our passage: **“Whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.”** *The Message* reads, **“Right now, every time we get the chance, let us work for the benefit of all, staring with the people closest to us in the community of faith.”** Hear: “charity begins at home but it doesn’t stop there.” Maintaining the infrastructure of the church – providing for the worship, nurture, fellowship and care of the people of God – is vital to the church’s mission, but it is not the mission. The church’s mission is much larger than our own institutional well-being or survival.

That the love of God made known in Jesus Christ is especially for you does not mean that it is for only you. To know Jesus in a personal way brings us into an intimate circle of faith, but the circle of God’s love is at least as big as the world. Our personal relationship with Jesus is never to be a private one.

Sometimes people are puzzled by this question: “Why did God choose the Jews?” Or, “Why would God choose to love only one family out of all the families of the world?” God didn’t choose to love the Jews – and later on, the church – to the exclusion of the other families of the earth. God entered into an intimate relationship with one family for the sake of all families – that they, too, may find an intimate relationship with God.

When God called Abraham and Sarah and told them to venture forth to a Promised Land, God promised them many blessings so that by them, “all the families of the earth would be blessed.”¹ After God led the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, he told them, **“You shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.”**² The priesthood is a very special relationship, indeed, but to be God’s priest is to be in service for others.

Many times God’s people have deceived themselves into thinking their special relationship with God meant they had exalted status and were guaranteed protection against the onslaughts of life. Quite the opposite is the case. Eight centuries before Christ, the prophet Amos had to set the record straight for the Jews: **“You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.”**³ Jesus had to set his disciples straight as well: **“From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.”**⁴

Where did we ever get the idea that *especially for you* means *only you*? Listen to God speak again through Amos: **“People of Israel, I think as much of the people of Sudan as I do of you. I brought the Philistines from Crete and the Syrians from Kir, just as I brought you from Egypt?”**⁵ The church may well be the “apple of God’s eye,” as an old hymn text puts it,⁶ but there is other fruit in the orchard.

Elsewhere Paul says, **“God is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.”**⁷ Yes, because we know Jesus, we are privileged to know in a very real way of God’s undying love, but our calling does not make us members of God’s private salvation club. We are not to gloat in our status but to widen the circumference of the circle. Narrowness has no place in God’s economy.

Here’s how I see it. God makes each one of us unique and truly special. The Psalmist sings, **“You know me inside and out, you know every bone in my body; You know exactly how I was made, bit by bit, how I was sculpted from nothing into something.”**⁸ For the most part, I like how I was sculpted! I have a few fantasies from time to time, but I really wouldn’t want to be anyone else. I like being me. I think the saddest people in the world are those who want to be like someone else – someone other than who God created them to be.

I also live in a family that I cherish. Again, for the most part, I wouldn’t trade it for any other family in the world. But God help the neighborhood known as Winner’s Circle in Montgomery Township if the Kemp’s lived as if their household was the only one of importance. Neighborhoods would self-destruct if every family was narrowly focused on itself. The 11:00 news on the 4th of July carried a story about several neighborhoods in Philadelphia that held block parties so neighbors could meet neighbors and enjoy food and games together. “It’s better than getting lost in the crowd at the Art Museum,” one man said. An old fashioned concept, to be sure, but a very human and redemptive one. There is something very special and intimate about our relationships within our families, but that doesn’t mean we live as if we were the only family on the block.

What really makes me sit up and take notice that I am special is my baptism. No, I don’t remember it because I was a baby in my parents arms. No, baptism itself didn’t make me any more special than I already was before I was baptized, but it was the public declaration that I am a child of God. **“See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are.”**⁹

Not only am I a child of God, my baptism declares me to be a member of Christ’s family. Congregational life, therefore, is very special to me. Including the congregation in which I was raised as a child, I have tried to live out my faith in five different congregations. Right now I live in a very special church family - First Presbyterian Church of Ambler. Some of you may remember that when I began my ministry among you we had a series of cluster meetings so that we could become better acquainted with each other. I developed a simple form for you to fill out which would guide our discussion. One of the questions was, “If you could ask Bill one question, what would it be?” One person responded, “Will you love us?” I’m sure I responded affirmatively. After all, Christian love is first of all an act of will. I have to say, however, that after 9 years together I really like you. You have become my church home. I’ve even developed a like-affair with Philadelphia! But people in other places and in other congregations feel the same way.

As special as congregational life is to me, it also brings me into a particular Christian tradition which is also very special to me. I’m a life-long Presbyterian – baptized, confirmed, married, ordained, all in the context of the Presbyterian branch of Christ’s church. The name has morphed over time¹⁰, but it’s the same tradition. Although I don’t know differently, I can’t imagine being part of another denomination. This is my spiritual home.

But the circle continues to be ever-widening. One of the reasons I like being a Presbyterian is because we are free from making any claims about being the “one true church”. Although being

Presbyterian is in my blood, this tradition will not allow me to look down my nose at other traditions as being not quite up to snuff. In fact, Presbyterians have always been leaders in the ecumenical movement which seeks to overcome the divisiveness of so much denominationalism. We share a real kinship with Christians of any expression, while realizing that the church is not the be all and end all of God's saving activity.

I'm, also privileged to live in the United States of America. In spite of our flaws, I wouldn't want to live anywhere else on this planet. With all the patriotic fervor expressed this past Wednesday, it's obvious that Americans feel like they are a special people – and we are.

*This is my home, the country where my heart is.
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine;
But other hearts in other lands are beating
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.*¹¹

God would be little more than a tribal deity if God didn't think as much of the people of Iraq and Iran, of Afghanistan and the Sudan, as he does of us. People like to sing, "God bless America," and I pray that God would continue to bless America, but doesn't the scripture say that God wants to bless all the families of the earth?¹²

Hanging in my office is a picture of Jesus called, *Coat of Many Colors, Lord of All* by Thomas Blackshear. The title echoes the Joseph story in the Book of Genesis. Joseph was one of the 12 sons of Jacob. The story says that "[Jacob] loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of many colors."¹³ As you can imagine, Joseph's brothers were fiercely jealous of him. Can't you hear them whining? "Dad loves Joseph more than he loves anyone of us or all of us put together." Wouldn't we so whine as well?

Blackshear pictures Jesus wearing a coat of many colors, but it would never cause any of the world's peoples to be jealous. Jesus' coat has embroidered into it the flags of several nations and the Star of David. I think it's fair to say that Blackshear means them to be representative of all the nations of the world because he also includes the emblem of the United Nations. And so the church has sung for centuries:

*Beautiful Savior! Lord of the nations!
Son of God and Son of man!
Glory and honor, praise, adoration,
Now and forever more be thine!*

If you know the story of Jesus, you know that he never "lords it over people" as do the godless. "It should not be so among you," Jesus told his disciples.¹⁴ Jesus exercises his lordship only by setting aside all Godly prerogatives and taking on the role of a servant.¹⁵

This should go without saying but we often live as if we forget – "**For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son...**"¹⁶ It doesn't say that God so loved the church, or any one particular nation of people, it says, God so loved the *world!*

A young woman went to see a psychiatrist. When the doctor established that she was a wife and mother of three children, he blurted out, "Which of your three children do you love the most?" She

answered instantly, “I love all three of my children the same.” He paused. The answer seemed to him to be too glib, too quick. He probed a bit more. “Come, now, you love all three the same?” “Yes, that’s right,” she said, “I love all of them the same. He said, “come off it now! It is psychologically impossible for anyone to regard any three human beings exactly the same. If you’re not willing to level with me, we’ll have to terminate this session.” With that the young woman broke down, cried a bit, and said, “All right, I do not love all three of my children the same. When one of them is sick, I love that child more. When one of them is in pain, or lost, I love that child more. When one of them is confused, I love that child more. And when one of my children is bad—I don’t mean naughty, I mean really bad—I love that child more. But, she added, except for those exceptions I do love all three of my children about the same.

God loves each one of us as if there was only one of us to love and when you are sick or hurting or lost or confused or in pain or depraved – God loves you even more. Our calling is to love others in the same way.

1. See Genesis 12:1-3
2. Exodus 19:5-6
3. Amos 3:2
4. Luke 12:48
5. Amos 9:7, *Good News Bible*
6. See the hymn, *I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord*, by Timothy Dwight, 1800
7. 1 Timothy 4:10
8. Psalm 139:15 (*The Message*)
9. 1 John 3:1
10. My early years were in the United Presbyterian Church of North America which merged in 1958 with the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. to become the United Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. In 1983, the UPCUSA merged with the Presbyterian Church, U. S. (the so-called “Southern Presbyterian Church”) to become the current Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
11. Lloyd Stone, 1934
12. Genesis 12:3
13. Genesis 37:3 (*King James Version*)
14. Mark 10:42
15. See Philippians 2:6-11
16. John 3:16