



“There Is No Y’all in All”

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Hebrews 13: 1-8, 15-16; Jeremiah 2: 4-13

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My “Northern” husband and I were married here in Atlanta, and many of his family members in Rhode Island were unable to make the trip down for the wedding. I first met Billy’s extended family about a month after our Southern wedding, at a belated wedding reception at my in-law’s house. It was an unusually hot, late August afternoon, and I wore a fluffy dress with a scratchy crinoline if I remember correctly. As the new bride, I stood under the tent in that still air, sweating—no, glowing—and shaking hands with Billy’s big, beautiful family. I recall the exact moment I met his uncle, Manuel Ferreira, Uncle Manny. His first words to me were, “Jody, it’s so good to meet you. Tell me . . . what are you?”

I didn’t know how to answer him. I wasn’t even sure what he was asking. I stammered for a minute and finally said, “I’m . . . American?”

“No, no, Jody,” he explained, “I mean are you Italian? Portuguese? Irish?” I had only identified as Southern and Georgian most of my life. I didn’t know much about my heritage. My second answer wasn’t any more helpful: “Uncle Manny, I guess I’m . . . a mutt?” It made him laugh, and then he leaned in and reassured me by giving the highest compliment he could give: “You know, Jody, you could pass for Portuguese.”

Uncle Manny was asking me, to what tribe do you belong? Tribe is important in Bristol, RI, a town of 20 thousand that boasts three Roman Catholic churches within a few blocks: St. Elizabeth’s (Portuguese), St. Mary’s (Irish), and Our Lady of Mt. Carmel (Italian).

And so now I ask each of you this morning, “What are you?” Think about it for a minute. How do you self-identify? What would other say about you?

Next month, when we invite new members into this church, the first question we’ll ask during worship is, “Who are you?” The answer is, first and foremost, “I am a child of God.” And then that phrase is followed by, “And my name is Isaac or Beth or Mary or Rick.”

Jeremiah 2, verse 4: “Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, and ALL the families of the house of Israel.” There is nothing wrong with proudly saying you are Portuguese, Ghanaian, Irish or a mutt. But what matters deeply, what we all should first say when we are asked to identify

ourselves is “I am a child of God.” Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, and ALL the families of the house of Israel. That me. That’s you. That’s us. Or to put it in southern terms, that’s me, that’s y’all, that’s all y’all.

And *all y’all* are made in God’s image. Genesis 1:27: “So God created humankind in God’s image . . . male and female God created them.” And while my natural inclination is to separate me and “my people” or my tribe from other people that I don’t know, it’s not how God tells us to look at the world. God made humankind in God’s own image. That’s everyone. And when I separate myself, think of myself and my people as better than y’all, I disparage the image of God.

God created us all. God calls us to love and respect all of God’s creation—God’s people and God’s good earth. When we separate ourselves by tribe, gender, age, nationality, skin color or any other differences, when we let those differences dictate how we live, our terms for living together, we begin worshipping something other than God.

Jeremiah 2, verse 5: “Thus says the LORD: ‘What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?’” This is not God using that classic breakup language, “It’s not you, it’s me.” This is not God even asking for an answer. This is a rhetorical question. There is no wrong in God that our ancestors could have found. God’s tone is incredulous here. God is saying, “Why in the world don’t you live as I’ve instructed? My instructions are for your own good! And here you are, going after worthless things, becoming worthless yourselves!”

Raise your hand if you’ve heard of something called the “Tri-State Water Wars.” This long-lasting acrimonious lawsuit between Georgia, Alabama and Florida is only a decade short of reaching the Biblical description of forever: 40 years. Water flows south from Georgia into Alabama and Florida, and our state maintains both Lake Lanier and Lake Allatoona as reservoirs for a thirsty Atlanta. In 1990, Alabama filed suit against the US Army Corps of Engineers, saying Georgia was taking more than their fair share of water. In 2014, Florida piled on saying downstream pollution from Atlanta was destroying their oyster beds.¹

There have been some exciting headlines from Supreme Court rulings and Special Master reports, and with each turn in the case I find myself rooting for GA, that the judge will rule in “our” favor. What is that? Setting all football rivalries aside, why would I root for the state of GA over the state of AL or FL?

Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel. ALL. God is the God over all, not just a preferred bunch, a particular tribe. All. And ALL need water.

¹ <https://www.tampabay.com/news/environment/Supreme-Court-finally-rules-on-Florida-s-30-year-water-war-with-Georgia-And-it-s-not-over-169506140/>, August 31, 2019

Can you remember the last time you were thirsty? Really, really, thirsty? You were desperate for a drink of water on a long hike, before a surgical procedure, or when finishing a spicy meal. Maybe you recall waking up in the middle of the night, completely parched?

When I was a kid, our family played tennis at a nearby public park. We'd drill and play games all day long in the heat. This was back in the 1970's, when tennis ball cans were made of metal. After a zillion crosscourt forehands, my sister and I, sweating—no, glowing-- would run over to the drinking fountain and fill our tennis ball cans with cool water and drink deeply. There was nothing that mattered more than quenching our thirst. To this day, a metallic flavor in my mouth tastes like tennis, summer and family.

There's a different kind of thirst that's prevalent on social media these days. Raise your hand if you've heard of a "thirst trap." When a person posts a picture of themselves that invites comments, especially compliments, people accuse them of being "thirsty," as in thirsty for attention. It seems that in 2019, just like thousands of years ago, being thirsty is a metaphor for really needing something.

What do water wars and public drinking fountains and Instagram photos have to do with God? Jeremiah 2, verse 13, God says, "For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns, that can hold no water."

We humans divide up ourselves into tribes and argue over a finite amount of water. We tell ourselves that if we build enough waterproof cisterns, we can take care of our own. We can store up what we will need for the future if we manage to keep people not in our tribe—the y'all—away from it.

We foolishly claim that what we have belongs to us, as if all of creation is not a gift from God for ALL of humankind. We guard ourselves against getting thirsty, we go to war over ensuring our needs will be met.

People, hear the good news. Loving your neighbor quenches that thirst. Deep longing needs a good dose of water. Longing is thirst that can only be quenched through the fountain, the spring of our redeemer, Jesus Christ. Plunge into the waters of baptism, they are overflowing. Drink deeply from the cup of salvation. Our sacraments say it all. Professor Sally A. Brown writes, "Baptism and the Table of the Lord compress [Christ's] saving story into an economy of words and eloquent action."

The word "yaal" in Hebrew means to confer or gain profit or benefit.² So when we tear down what separates us from the rest of God's children, when we include "all y'all," we all gain profit

² <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/3276.htm>, August 31, 2019.

and benefit. Hebrews 13, verses 1-2: "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

The table is open. It's not just for "us." There is no reason y'all should stay away. Jesus presides at the head and with Christ there is no war over scarce resources. He invites all y'all to tear down the barriers we've built to separate us, to greet one another, despite our differences, as brothers and sisters in Christ, and to break bread together.

May it be so, today and tomorrow and until our Lord comes again. Drink up, all y'all. Amen.