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<sup>23</sup> Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. <sup>24</sup> So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. <sup>25</sup> But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, <sup>26</sup> for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. <sup>27</sup> For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. <sup>28</sup> There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup> And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. Galatians 3:23-29 (NRSV)

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Have you ever had a time in your life where you felt like you were the 'outsider'? The reality is that all of us, at some stage in life (perhaps even now) have times where we feel like we 'don't fit in'. For some, this occurs during school years. For others, this may happen after they have left school and its structures as they have to 'make their way in the world'. Others may feel this at work, or in home, or in family, or in their local community, or in the social clubs they have joined for connection, or even in the life of a church. Have you ever had the feeling of 'being an outsider', and not really 'fitting in'? How did (does) this make you feel? And what do you think are adult and mature responses when we feel like this?

Sometimes, when people have these feelings, they begin to withdraw even further from those around them – even those close to them such as dear family and friends. Have you ever done this? And what do you think we may do when someone we know starts to seem like they're 'on the outside'?

Of course, there is another side to 'being an outsider'. Sometimes we feel like an 'outsider' because we know we 'don't fit it'. We know we have done something wrong, and it has disconnected us from those around us.

The Israelites had slavery to add to their dislocation anxiety. God scattered them among foreign nations, fulfilling his promise to send them into captivity if they forgot to keep him first and foremost in their lives. But in strange lands, far from temple life and the comfort of communal worship, God promised to be their sanctuary in the midst of their isolation. The abiding presence of the Lord would go with the scattered people into foreign lands. We, too, long to be hidden in the presence of God.

When it comes to feeling like we're 'outsiders, we know is not so much a physical isolation, but a kind of non-connection with the many, many people who are actually very much all around you.

The surface reasons we may tell ourselves why we are 'alone' may include: "I'm not likeable *by others*; *others* don't want me around. I haven't found the

right *other* person. I'm so unique that it is impossible *for others* to understand me. This is not a place where I'll fit in *with others* because I'm different." But Emily Dickinson, an American poet of the 1800s, offers a different perspective. She once said this: "The Loneliness, whose worst alarm / is lest itself should see / and perish from before itself / for just a scrutiny." Dickinson is not the most transparent poet, but what she is saying is something along these lines: if you plumb that loneliness you're really reading a map – not of other people, but of your own soul. And such an expedition – a kind of spelunking of the soul – can either avoid all those closed off spaces, or unseal them.

In both the First Reading and Gospel for today (1 Kings 19: Elijah flees to Mt. Horeb; and Luke 8:26-39: Jesus heals the demoniac) we hear of people who felt a great sense of loneliness. Elijah said, "Take my life, Lord... I am the only one left." The man possessed by demons lived in the place of the dead (where no one would normally go). They experienced a great 'loneliness of the soul'. But let me offer a radical reason why they (and we) experience loneliness: it is because of sin.

Elijah – in his pride – said, "I am the only one left." What did the Lord say in response? He said, "I reserve seven thousand in Israel – all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal." Elijah wasn't alone: he chose to be alone. The man possessed by demons was afflicted by such evil where he no longer lived among the living. He may well have chosen such (in speaking with another pastor associated with those oppressed by the occult, he said that in his experience there was always a point where people 'gave themselves over' to such evil: they chose it). Loneliness comes from sin at work in the world, and sin at work in the heart.

Dan Allendar, in his book "The Wounded Heart: Hope for Adult Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse" offers a radical observation on this point. He says that very often there is a point where victims of abuse also have to confess their sins. Their 'sins', however, have nothing to do with the abuse itself (of which the blame rests entirely on the perpetrator). Rather, what may happen is an 'idol of the heart' may develop whereby people either 'cling to their abuse' (with anger or hatred) or they trust in some other 'thing' for 'help' and 'healing'.

In many ways people may feel 'trapped' in some sense of 'loneliness' or 'isolation'.

Why do we often feel 'trapped' in life? The Apostle Paul says this (Galatians 3:23-24): "We were held in custody under the law, locked up..." He goes on to say, "We were locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. So the law was our guardian." He goes on to say: "We are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.."

Luther says this in relation to the Law of God: "The Law is a prison to those who have not as yet obtained grace. No prisoner enjoys the confinement. He hates it. If he could he would smash the prison and find his freedom at all cost."

It is sin that separates. It is sin that separates people from people. It is sin that separates people from God. But God has set us free in Christ. This deep theological truth is something worthy of great reflection. It is sin that separates people from God. But God has set us free in Christ. And so the Apostle Paul says this (Galatians 4:4-5), "When the set time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship." (Note that the word 'sonship' is important – we are brought into the very life of Christ himself!).

Paul also says this (Galatians 3:28): "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (BTW: this is not a text for or against Women's Ordination, or same-sex relationships as some suggest. To turn this text into such is to create a 'new law'. Rather: this is a text that states we all have *salvation* in Christ: we have equal status [not 'same roles'] before God. Cf Luther: "If the woman would change places with the man, if the son would change places with the father, the servant with the master, nothing but confusion would result. In Christ, however, all are equal. We all have one and the same Gospel, "one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all," one Christ and Saviour of all.").

Luther says, "Christ fulfilled the Law for us. And so we may live in joy and safety under Christ." Luther also says, "God makes it simple. He clothes us with the righteousness of Christ by means of Baptism, as the Apostle says in this verse: "As many of you as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ." With this change of garments a new birth, a new life stirs in us. *New affections* toward God spring up in the heart. *New determinations* affect our will. All this is to put on Christ according to the Gospel."

God's grace gives us this new identity, children of God. And this new identity has to shape who we are and how we live. As Paul said: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."

In all this, you are 'one' with Christ, and you are 'one' with one another: and this is not of your own efforts. It is the gift of God. No one, absolutely no one is an 'outsider' to Christ. (BTW – this does not excuse sinful behaviour that harms or isolates others. Indeed, this 'inclusion' in Christ calls us to a high order of 'striving daily to lead a holy life even as Christ has made us holy'. But nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord).

In this new land of the New Testament, there is no separation between us. We are united to Christ and therefore to one another. There is neither Jew

nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; there is no male and female. There is one people of God, indistinguishable from one another because we share in Christ's righteousness. God's adopted sons and daughters find our chief identity in God's redeeming work for us in Jesus Christ.

It is easy to be happy when everything in your life is going well but being a Christian means having a sense of 'belonging' and 'connection' even when things seem to be going against us. The world is a very uncertain place. Covid-19 crisis, natural disasters, financial insecurity, economic crises, relationship problems – how can anyone possibly find rest in such a tumultuous time? No matter what happens in the world, God takes care of His children. Come what may, God will take care of those who love Him. Whether we understand what the end result of a situation is or don't understand it at all, we can go through life in complete confidence and rest in God, knowing that our whole life has been arranged for the best.

There's no need to feel on the outside any longer with God. Jesus paid a huge sacrifice so that you could be brought near to God. His blood was poured out for you and now your sin has been paid for forever. You have been brought near to God and all His blessings are now yours. This is not something that you have to work at. You do not have to work to be close to God. It's a done deal.

If you are in Jesus, you have been placed close to God. The only thing that seems to hold us back is that we do not know it and we do not believe it. Today believe this truth. You have been brought near to God. God is in love with you and it's all to do with Jesus' blood. This truth will not change tomorrow. You can rest in God's love brought to you by Jesus' blood.

You are never alone. God is talking to you. He has spoken His clear Word to you in Jesus, His eternal Son. He has said, "You are loved." Here He says, "I give you the place of My Son: you have His life as a gift!." Here He has said, "You are never alone: I am with you always." God has sent the Spirit into our hearts who enables us to cry (even in the darkest times: especially in the darkest times): "Abba, Father: Father, dear Father."

Rejoice in the fact you are never an 'outsider' to Christ, but a dear member of His heavenly family. You are never alone. Knowing and loving God is our greatest privilege; and being known and loved is God's greatest pleasure. Christ is with you; you are clothed in Christ. As a redeemed child of God, you are never alone. Amen.