

The contrast between Lillian's two sons couldn't have been greater. One was motivated, focused and hard-working, - a graduate of Annapolis, --- a nuclear submarine officer, and then a successful farmer and businessman ---- who would go on to be governor, and ultimately the President of the United States. The other, - -- a seemingly unfocused, irreverent, outrageous to the point of being bizarre, --- hard-drinking, good old boy.

I'm referring, of course, to Jimmy Carter and his brother, Billy. Billy, - who was often an embarrassing distraction to Jimmy Carter's campaign -and then to his presidency. Billy, who came out with his own line of beer, named Billy Beer. Each can featured his signature following this personal quote: *I had this beer brewed just for me. I think it's the best I've ever tasted, -And I've tasted a lot. I think you'll like it, too.* Signed: Billy Carter.

But the story I want to lift up - is about their mother, Miss Lillian - who was herself, quite an interesting person, --- -who spent her life fighting against segregation, -and who joined the Peace Corps at age 68 - and was sent to India for two years where she worked with lepers.

On the day of Jimmy Carter's presidential inauguration, --after the ceremony ended, his family left the reviewing stand, and started walking down Pennsylvania Avenue

toward the White House. They were soon surrounded by reporters - and the first question was directed at Lillian. "Miss Lillian," the reporter asked, "aren't you proud of your son?" As the TV cameras zoomed in, she looked right at the reporter and deadpanned, "Which one?"

She was being witty -and perhaps a bit sassy, -but she was also making a point: While the world uses all kinds of criteria to judge and categorize people, --as a parent, - her two sons were equal to her -in terms of the love she had for each of them, ----- which to her - was the one thing that mattered most.

The contrast between another two sons could also hardly be greater. One was hard-working, prudent and obedient-- - who stayed working on the family farm ---supporting the family business. The other was demanding and impudent-- - who demanded his share of the inheritance early --- and then went off to a foreign country and blew right through it - wasting it all.

When the loose-living prodigal son came to his senses and returned home, his father greeted him with open arms. As a father, his love extended equally to his two sons. When it came to the heart of the matter, the

only thing that really mattered was the father's loving, forgiving grace --which did not distinguish between sons, but was offered to both.

The heart of the matter is the relationship between the father and his children; --the heart of the matter is the amazing grace of God, ---- which does not take into account the criteria and categories the world uses, but is offered to all --- equally.

Jesus' whole ministry embodied this inclusive grace of God. Not only did he speak of it in his preaching and his parables, but he acted it out in his ministry of healing and serving. He reached out to all people, regardless of who they were: he healed the daughter of the leader of the Jewish synagogue, - he healed the slave of a Roman gentile centurion, - he healed the woman with the hemorrhage which kept her perpetually unclean, and he healed a blind beggar. He brought forgiveness and new life -to a rich tax collector named Zaccheus, and to the Samaritan woman at the well -who was ostracized because of her many marriages.

Jesus demonstrated that *God's loving grace is for all people - without distinction.*

After Jesus' death and resurrection, his disciples continued to bear witness to the inclusive grace of God.

When Peter had a vision that he was to go to Caesarea to stay with and preach the good news to Cornelius - a gentile, -a member of the Italian Legion -who didn't follow a kosher diet, Peter proclaimed, "I now truly understand that God shows no partiality."

God's loving grace is for all people - without distinction.

The apostle Paul continued to carry the good news of God's grace - throughout the Mediterranean world --- preaching not only to the Jewish people in each city, but also to the Gentiles, or the "Greeks" as he called them.

As more and more Gentiles became believers in Christ, this set up a problem. Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians were having a hard time getting along with each other. Jewish Christians still followed the Jewish laws; - the Gentile Christians did not. --Particularly, -they had a hard time eating together, -including - sharing in the Lord's Supper together. Should they follow kosher eating habits or not? Divisions formed between them.

Paul addresses this concern in all of his letters, -but in this letter to the Galatians, he uses amazingly strong

language. He doesn't just say- "hey, Jewish Christians and Greek Christians, hey, Jews and Greeks, --- why can't we all just get along?"

He says, "there is no longer Jew nor Greek, -- for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

God's loving grace is for all people - without distinction.

Notice how Paul doesn't say there's both Jews and Greeks in Christ. He says there's neither Jews nor Greeks!

All categories and distinctions between people have been made completely irrelevant! --- There's neither slave nor free! There's neither male nor female!!!!

And we could add more --- there's neither rich nor poor; there's neither black nor white; there's neither Methodist nor Pentecostal, there's neither Catholic nor non-denominational; there's neither first world nor third world; neither boss nor worker; neither American nor Mexican, neither Canadian nor South African; neither Republican nor Democrat; neither Red Sox fan nor Yankees fan. What else would you add

There is no longer any kind of distinction -that makes any real difference between people.

Not in Christ. In Christ, we are one!

In Christ, Paul is saying, - all categories, all ranks and privileges, all hierarchies, all boundaries -- completely disappear!

In Christ, - each and every barrier between people is gone. Kaput. No more. This isn't just some new social theory. It's fact.

It happened 2,000 years ago on the cross. Through Jesus Christ, God's grace is extended to all people without distinction, - and we all start over with a new identity.

We can like it or dislike it. We can even resist it. But we can't deny it without risking departure from the Christian faith. Ontologically, - things changed. In and through Christ, we are now "one people."

Whoever is 'in Christ' - is my brother or sister. Period. Whether I believe it or not, -it doesn't matter. It doesn't change the fact of it.

"There are no longer any distinctions between us at all," Paul says, "because we are one in Christ Jesus!"

It's an amazingly simple statement, yet in the history of humankind, there is no statement more powerfully revolutionary or radical.

Can you imagine how the world would be different if we really lived this out? If we really started living as if all forms of power and status were actually irrelevant. If we truly started questioning all the inequalities that exist.

If we actually started living as if we all loved each other.

Think how our Christian witness looks to the world right now. Oh, I know we often say we believe that our worth comes solely from the grace of God, but then we act like all kinds of other things matter tremendously. We judge and categorize others based on a whole host of factors: education, wealth, status, clothing, address, accent, employment, career, ability, talent, denomination, theology, political viewpoint, nationality, ethnicity, age, gender.

To all this, Paul says, 'it's over.' There's no future in it, and certainly no freedom. For freedom, Christ has set us free --from all these false divisions.

God's loving grace is for all people - without distinction.

We are one in Christ Jesus. Let's start living it out.

Praise be to God.