

2nd Sunday after Pentecost
June 23, 2019
Galatians 3:23-29

Clothed in Christ

Last week was a wild ride. It was our very first “Confirmation Camp.” If you’ve never heard of Confirmation Camp, I’m not surprised. So far as I can determine, Christy Williams made it up. And, like most of Christy’s concoctions, it consisted of fellowship, study, fun, travel, and, of course, food – not in any particular order but to great and, I pray, lasting benefit.

Here are the basic ingredients for Confirmation Camp: Take four lively teenagers ranging from rising 8th to rising 10th grade, add their pastor and Christian Educator, rent a van for excursions to Wakulla Springs, Dogwood Acres, Westminster Oaks, Temple Israel, Holy Mother of God Greek Orthodox Church, and two other Presbyterian Churches, climb into the attic of First Presbyterian, ascend the bell tower, pump the organ, play the same, review the Old Testament, romp through the New Testament, conduct research on major figures in the Bible, observe baby alligators in their natural habitat, discuss two Biblical creation stories while eating ice cream, play extended games of Uno, define theological terms, play “Hangman” with same, interview “cool old people” about their faith, see “Men in Black” at the I-Max Theater (which has nothing to do with anything) explain to a Baby Boomer what K-pop music is, listen to same, build a component to a sling-shot range, paint a panel for same, interview Florida Presbytery’s General Presbyter, figure out what the heck a General Presbyter is, compare and contrast styles of church architecture, review church history from the resurrection of Christ to the present day, and relate all of the above to the sacrament of baptism and the centrality of grace and gratitude.

Nothing to it, really, provided Christy is in charge and you have four willing, energetic, and intelligent adolescents named Bryce, Camille, Thomas, and Ethan to ride along with you.

We covered a lot in the five days of Confirmation Camp, but we didn’t cover everything. We never got around to Galatians 3:23-29, which most theologians will tell you is the heart of Paul’s letter to the Christians in Galatia.

The vital question faced by Paul and those early Galatian Christians is no longer a sticking point for us, but Paul’s response to the crisis faced by the Galatians has everything to do with being Christian today.

I told the folks in the Confirmation Class that Reformed theology is covenant theology, and a covenant is an agreement based on mutual promises. In the Bible, God's promise comes first and has nothing to do with how good or bad we are, where we come from, who our parents are, how much money we have, our grade point average, or what color our skin might be. Those things don't matter when discussing the idea of covenant.

What matters is God's grace – God's unmerited love which is pure gift – undeserved, unanticipated, free. In the Bible that grace is expressed in many ways, but one of the most important is God's covenant with Israel.

According to the Bible, the people of Israel were no great shakes. They were not the most powerful amongst their neighbors, nor the most impressive. As Deuteronomy says, **“It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you – for you were the fewest of all the peoples.”** No, it was **“because the Lord loved you . . .”**¹

An expression of that gracious love is revealed in God's call to Abraham and Sarah. *Pack up your stuff and go to a land that I will show you, and I will make of you a great nation, and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.*²

The law given to Moses on Mount Sinai – that too was a sign of grace. Far from a burden to be endured, the law was given as a guide on how to live together as God's covenant people.

When the Confirmation Camp visited Temple Israel down the street, Stephanie Posner, the synagogue's Director of Religious Education, opened the ark, took out the Torah scrolls, and rolled them out for us to see. When we asked about the stained-glass window nearby, Stephanie explained that that was an image of the Tree of Life. “For us,” she said, “the Tree of Life is a symbol of the Torah.”

The crucial issue facing those first Christians in Galatia was this: What has the law to do with being Christian? Or to put it another way, How Jewish do you have to be in order to share in God's promise to Abraham and Sarah?

¹ Deuteronomy 7:7-8

² Genesis 12:1-3

How do Gentiles get to be heirs of the Covenant? Do Gentile Christian males have to be circumcised? Do all Gentile Christians have to observe the dietary requirements of the Mosaic law? It was clear to the Galatians that Jewish and Gentile Christians were very different from one another culturally. Doesn't one group have to give up its distinctiveness in order to blend in?

These are thorny questions, and Paul's answers are by no means cut and dried. In this passage, however, Paul encourages the Galatians to think of the Mosaic law in a new way.

Don't think of the law as a way of separating Jews from everyone else and limiting God's grace. Remember God's promise to Abraham that through his family God would bless all the families of the earth.

Think of the law as a guardian, as a kind of live-in tutor. The word in Greek is *pedagogus* from which we get our word "pedagogue." The New Revised Standard Version translates, "disciplinarian." I suppose you could even say, think of the law as an au-pair, guiding and leading the way toward maturity.

The role of the pedagogue is to bring pupils to the point where they can stand on their own.

Now that Christ has come, those who have faith in him don't need the law in the same way, writes Paul. ". . . **the law was our pedagogue until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith.**"³ Ironically, however, faith in Christ isn't about standing on our own. It's about standing on God's promises. It's not about trusting in ourselves. It's about trusting in the crucified and risen Christ. Faith in Christ is about shedding all pretenses, letting go of all claims to righteousness, and accepting God's gift of pure grace.

To use Paul's metaphor, faith in Christ is like taking off an old garment and putting on a brand new one. It's about shedding the old garment of sin and pretense to goodness and putting on the new garment of Christ. "**As many of you as were baptized into Christ Jesus have clothed yourselves with Christ,**" writes Paul.⁴

³ Galatians 3:23

⁴ Galatians

If you ask them, the confirmands will tell you how, in the early centuries of the church's life, that reality was expressed in a most dramatic way.

Back then, those who were about to take the vows of baptism would enter the baptismal pool naked. After making their vows and having been washed in the baptismal waters, they would emerge from the pool and put on a new white garment, the sign of "clothing themselves with Christ."

(The confirmands seemed fascinated by this approach to liturgy, but relieved to it is no longer the custom.)

And here's the thing, Paul tells those Galatians: You entered those waters as Jews and Greeks, as slaves and free, as males and females, but now that you have been baptized, those distinctions no longer matter. You went in as Jews and Gentiles. You emerged as children of God. You went in as slaves and free. You emerged as Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. You went in as male and female. You emerged as one in Christ Jesus.

Those tired old categories of race, gender, and culture no longer define you. You have put on Christ. Now, instead of being barriers between you, those identifiers are signs of your diversity within the one body of Christ. What once were hindrances have become signs of encompassing grace.

Paul had to work hard to convince the Galatians that, despite their apparent differences, they were one in Christ. How I wish that the lesson learned in Galatia had stuck with the church. It wasn't long, however, before Gentile Christians stopped fretting about not being Jewish enough and started thinking of themselves as superior to the people of the First Covenant. They began to think that God had broken God's promises to Israel in order to welcome Gentiles into the Covenant of Grace. Paul taught no such thing. For Paul, the promise to Abraham was not nullified by Christ, but rather expanded.

As we were climbing around in the attic of the sanctuary last Friday, I explained to the confirmands that the bricks in this old building were made on Col. Richard Shine's plantation. Richard Shine owned slaves, and it's likely that the sweat of enslaved people is literally mixed into the bricks and mortar that make up this house of worship.

The confirmands had a hard time getting their heads around that. How could Christians who knew full well what Paul wrote in his Letter to the Galatians enslave their own brothers and sisters in Christ?

And when we explained that many churches today don't ordain women as ministers, deacons, or elders, the confirmands cocked their heads and said "What?" They did the same when we began to talk about including trans and LGBT people in the full life and leadership of the church.

"What?" You mean some churches don't do that already?

The thing that gave me the greatest joy last week and the greatest cause for hope was that confused look on the faces of those young people. For them, the very idea that women would be barred from leadership in the church, or that LGBT people would be scorned, or that trans brothers and sisters would be excluded made no gospel sense to them.

For you see, most of these young people have been worshipping in this sanctuary since they were babes in arms. They have been shaped by worship, by youth meetings, by conferences at Montreat, by mission trips, by service projects – in short – by doing what disciples of Jesus Christ do. And all along the way, they have been overhearing and enacting the gospel.

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 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. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

"Really?" the Galatians said to Paul? "That's who we are?"

"Really!" say Celeste, Ethan, Thomas, and Bryce. "That's who we are."