

I

When I was in high school and for a few years in college, I worked weekends and school breaks as a server in a banquet hall. And every Saturday in the summer months, our hall was booked solid with wedding receptions.

Between my years as a banquet server and my years as a Minister of Word and Sacrament, I'd be willing to wager that I've personally witnessed more weddings than just about anyone you know.

II

Moreso than at any other social gathering, at a wedding, we readily identify people and their roles and relationships by observing the clothes wear. When I was a banquet server, my uniform was a white tuxedo shirt, black bowtie, black vest, and gold nametag with the banquet hall logo. When I lead a service of Christian marriage in this room, my uniform, so to speak, is my robe and stole.

It's not just the bride and groom or the attendants or their families or the photographers or the servers – at a wedding, everyone puts much time thought into their clothing choices, because our clothes say something about us, and about our roles and relationships.

And that's the driving metaphor in the text before us this morning from Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia.

III

Last week, Whitney introduced us to a book of the bible called Galatians. Galatians isn't a book at all in the traditional sense, but rather a letter written about 15 years or so after Christ's death and resurrection. The letter was written by a man named Paul and was addressed to a fledgling community of Christians in a region of the modern-day nation of Türkiye known as Galatia.

In those early days, as the good news about Jesus was spreading from Jerusalem and out to the ends of the earth, the gospel, which of course has its roots in first century Judaism, started bumping up against other religions. And the first followers of Jesus, all of whom had been born and raised as faithful first-century Jews, made a startling discovery. The Holy Spirit was working on people who had never heard of Father Abraham. The Holy Spirit was working on people who had no idea who Moses was, never mind the Ten Commandments or the rest of the law.

As the Holy Spirit was blowing the good news about Jesus further and further into the world, the gospel started bumping into other cultures and other faiths. But something remarkable was happening. People who had come of age in other religions, were nevertheless, by the power of the Holy Spirit, coming to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was in fact the Messiah, the one in whom all of human history and all of human destiny come together.

And they wanted to know, what's required of me? What must I do to show others that I am a Christian?

And to answer that question, the Christians who had come of age as first-century Jews did what they knew to do – they went to their source of authority, the Torah, the first five books of the bible. And they read there that the mark of the covenant, the physical sign that one belongs to the faith, is for every male to be circumcised.

And I don't think I need to go any further, because I think you can already see the tension building. These Gentiles, as the non-Jews were called, were really intrigued by Jesus, but this seemed like a very big ask and an awfully high barrier.

And so as they were working out what to do, they did what they knew how to do – they called a meeting and got everybody in a room. In the 15th chapter of Acts, we read that the leaders of the church convened a meeting in Jerusalem. And as the text says, there was no small amount of dissention and debate. And in the end, the church council decided that circumcision would no longer be required. Baptism would be the mark of the covenant, the mark of belonging, for Jews and Gentiles alike.

Now, I know you might find this shocking, but just because one church council had one meeting and issued one policy statement, the controversy did not immediately cease. In fact, in Galatia, it appears that the circumcision

debate was still a live topic. And so the Apostle Paul, who had visited the region previously on one of his missionary journeys, sits down to write a letter to the Galatians to address the controversy. And that letter has been preserved and handed down to us and has come to be known to us as the Book of Galatians.

And so listen now for a Word from God from Galatians 3.

1 You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! 2 The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? 3 Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? 4 Did you experience so much for nothing?—if it really was for nothing. 5 Well then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard? 6 Just as Abraham "believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," 7 so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham. 8 And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you." 9 For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed.

23 Now before faith came, we were

imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. 24 Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. 25 But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, 26 for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. 27 As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 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. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ, says Paul. 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.

Imagine the Galatian Christians to whom Paul is addressing his letter. Maybe there are some who are wearing clothing common to law-observant Jews. Maybe they wear shawls and head coverings that identify their faith. And then side by side with them, there are people wearing clothes more commonly identified with Roman citizens. Maybe there are some who even wear the uniform of the Roman military worshiping side by side with some who wear the simple homespun of peasants

or even the tattered rags of slaves. The clothes we wear communicate something about us.

What Paul is arguing is that the promise of the blessing of all the families of the earth has come to fruition in the life, death, and resurrection of a first-century Jew named Jesus of Nazareth. In the waters of their baptisms, all of the different identities that the Galatians have previously held, whether they be male or female, Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, they are now one in Christ Jesus.

IV

My friend, if you have a driver's license or other form of identification within easy reach, take it out and hold it.

On my license, the first piece of data listed at the top of this little document is not my name. It's not my address, or my gender, or my height or weight or eye color or my date of birth. The first piece of data at the top of my driver's license is a number – the driver's license number that was assigned to me at random by the state of Georgia.

Now, there's nothing wrong with a driver's license number. But isn't it fascinating that the first thing listed on my most important identifying document isn't my name but rather a random number generated by a state computer?

But my friend, hear these words of encouragement from the Apostle Paul. The most important thing about you, my friend, is not a number, or your name, or your gender or your height or weight. The most important thing about us is not where you live, or the color of your eyes, or your age. The most important thing about you won't be found on any government issued document. For in your baptism, even your ID got wet.

The most important thing about you is that you belong, body and soul, in life and in death, not to yourself, not to any tribe or group or nation, but to your faithful savior Jesus Christ.

You belong, body and soul, in life and in death, not because of anything you've done, but because of who Jesus is, and not because of who you are, but because of what God has done for me in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.

V

And so let us remember always that the clothes we choose to wear communicate something about us. They tell something about our role and our relationships.

And so as we from this place, may we remember that we have been clothed with Christ in baptism. So let us think carefully about what we show to the world. As we drive our cars, as we post

on social media, as we engage in conversation with one another, as we interact with servers in restaurants, as we go into the world, let us think carefully about what we will show to the world. For the people out there are watching us. And they're not asking, "Is this story about Jesus true?" They're asking, "Does this story about Jesus and his love appear to make the least bit of difference in the lives of those who claim it?"

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.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.