

Rev. Dan Welch Pentecost 4 6-23-19 Text- Galatians 3: 23-29

Have you ever noticed how we spend a lot of time thinking about how different we are from other people? I lived in northern Wisconsin for ten years before coming back to my home state of Minnesota. While I was there I was constantly reminded that my favorite sports teams were not the same favorite sports teams of most of the natives of Wisconsin. I may not have been shunned or treated like an outsider because of that fact, but, I did receive my fair share of ribbing from time to time! Another example, and this one's a little more serious: Politics. Next year is an election year, so in the coming months you can be sure that you'll hear all the candidates talk about how different they are, and how much better they are, than the other candidates that are running for office.

Do we as Christians ever do that? Do you ever look around on a Sunday morning and think about how different you are from the other people here, and maybe even how much **better** you are in some way? It's a common thing for people to do. And while it is true – God has made each one of us different – we look different; our personalities are different, and so on, still I would **not** say that one person is **better** than another. In our Epistle reading today, God spends a lot of time telling us what we all have in **common**, how we're **similar**. And so that's what we're going to do this morning – we're going to focus on the things that we as Christians have in common. You're probably more similar to the people sitting nearby you than you think.

These words were written to the church in Galatia, and they had their problems. The people there were focusing too much on their differences, and how one person was better than another. The church there was a mixture of Jews and Greeks, slaves and free people, men and women – and all of these people were spending way too much time focusing on their differences. And so here, Paul, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, helps them to see all the things they have in common.

The first thing Christians have in common is that they all have gone to the same spiritual school. Now, what does **that** mean? Look at verse 23, where Paul says, "Before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until faith would be revealed." Here, St. Paul talks about the law – the Ten Commandments, and, back in those times, all the other different rules and regulations about worshiping God and offering sacrifices. The purpose of all of those laws was to teach God's people something; something important. Look at verse 24: "So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came." That was the purpose of all of those commandments, all of those rules and regulations. They

weren't there so that the Galatian Christians could try to earn their way to heaven, or compare themselves to other people. Why did God give His law to them? "The law was our guardian," kind of like our babysitter (!) "until Christ came." The purpose of the law was to teach the people something, and that is that they couldn't earn eternal life by following all those commands. The purpose of the law was to teach the people that only through faith in Christ could a person be saved.

Each one of us has attended God's "school of law." Before we go to God's school, we know a few things about God. We know that He exists, and that someday we'll meet Him. Before we go to God's school, we think that it's up to us to earn God's favor. "It's up to me to be a good person. If I'm good enough, then God will love me and let me into His heaven. I gotta depend on myself. It's up to me." Before a person attends God's school of law, that's how they are. That's how *we* were. But then we spend some time in the Word, the Bible, and the more you study the Bible, the more you realize that that's not how it works. Here God tells us to keep His commandments perfectly, and no one can do that. Here God tells us to love Him, and to love our neighbors, perfectly. No one can do that either. The more you study God's law, the more you realize that you're sinful, that you can't earn God's favor by being a good person, because you can never be good *enough*. There must be another way to be right with God. And there is. And that's the purpose of the law, verse 24: "The law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith." The purpose of the law is to be our guardian and to teach us to trust in Jesus, and not in ourselves. Instead of trusting in how good we are, we learn to trust in Christ, and how good *He* is. That's one thing that we all have in common here at First – we've all attended God's "school of law," and we've all learned this important lesson.

And we've all taken the same path to become members of God's family. No one here can say that they earned their way into God's family with their exemplary life. Instead, look at verse 26: "In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, *through faith*." That's how each of us has become a part of God's family – *through faith*. And what's faith?

Faith is like a certain blind girl who was trapped in a burning building in New York City. This girl was perched on the fourth floor window, and flames and smoke were pouring out of the window behind her. The firefighters below were becoming desperate, because they couldn't get a ladder up to that girl because the streets were too narrow. And they couldn't get her to jump into the net that they had set up below. Finally her father arrived and shouted

through the bullhorn that there was a net, and that she was to jump on his command. When he gave the word, the girl jumped and was so completely relaxed that she didn't break a bone or even strain a muscle in the four-story fall. She couldn't see the net, but she trusted her father completely, and jumped when she heard her father's voice.

That's a picture of faith. We're like that blind girl – we're trapped with all of our sins, trapped in a world that has all kinds of false ways to make you feel like you're OK with God. And we're blind - we can't see heaven. We can't see Jesus. None of us has ever seen Him die on the cross or rise from the dead. But God has called out to us through His Word, and through His Spirit He has convinced us to take that leap of faith. Faith is trusting in God's voice, God's Word. In a sense, we've all "jumped" into Christianity, and have become members of God's family through faith in Jesus Christ, trusting in Him and what He has done. We can't see Him with our eyes, but we trust Him with our hearts, and that's something that we all have in common.

As members of God's family, we have something else in common. Look at verse 27: "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." Or as the New International Version puts it you "have clothed yourselves with Christ." When you were baptized, God put some special kinds of clothes on you. It says here that all of you who were baptized have "clothed yourselves with Christ."

Do you realize that when you were baptized, God wrapped you up in something? When you were baptized, you were spiritually naked. But then God took the righteousness of Christ – all those good things that Jesus ever did – and He wrapped those good things around you. Then He took Jesus' sacrifice on the cross – His death for the sins of the world – and wrapped that sacrifice around you. Then He took Jesus' resurrection from the dead and wrapped that around you too. The life and death and resurrection of Jesus – they're all yours. And all the blessings that come with those things are yours. That's what it means when the Bible says that in baptism, you clothed yourselves with Christ.

When you look around the church today, you see that everyone is wearing different clothing. Except for us pastors, we're pretty much dressed the same! However, you would probably be surprised to walk into church and find someone wearing the exact same outfit as **you**. But spiritually, everyone here is wearing the same outfit, for "all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. (NIV)" This is one of the great things that all of us as Christians have in common.

When the Apostle Paul wrote these words to the Galatians, he told them these things to remind them that they were more similar than they thought. Look at what Paul says in verse 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.” From an earthly point of view, they were all different. Some of them were slaves, and some were free. But from a spiritual point of view, they were all one in Christ Jesus. And that’s what God wanted those Galatian Christians to think about.

Finally, Paul told them to think about their future inheritance. Verse 29: “If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.” Many of those Christians weren’t Jewish, and yet Paul here tells them that they were Abraham’s seed, and his heirs. The same inheritance God promised to Abraham in the Old Testament was theirs. All of them would inherit the gift of eternal life when they died, not because they lived a certain way or followed certain rules. But, as Paul says here: “according to the promise.”

And the same is true for you. Probably very few of us here have Jewish roots. And yet, the Bible here describes each one of us as Abraham’s seed. Spiritually, you are one of his descendants – he was the father of all believers. And that means that you will inherit the same blessings that God gave to him. Each of you will inherit eternal life, the gift of being in the presence of God in heaven forever, not because of yourself, but because of God’s promises of grace and forgiveness.

These are just some of the many blessings we all have in common as Christians. There will always be a tendency for us to focus on our differences. But I pray that we’ll never forget all the good things that make us the same in Christ. Amen.