Text: Galatians 3:23-29

Title: Clothed with Christ

It may seem somewhat materialistic to put it this way, but the clothing that we choose to wear, the styles, the brands, the cut of the fabrics, all send both intended and unintended messages about ourselves. While as the proverb puts it, the clothes do not make the man, they do reveal a good deal about how a person wishes to be perceived. In some cases this perception is quite overt.

Racing fans know exactly who is sponsoring their favorite driver because corporate logos are plastered not only on the car itself, but also on the helmets and protective racing suits that the drivers wear. And lest we think it is only stock car racers that boldly broadcast their sponsors with their clothing, any golf fan can identify who has sponsored a professional golfer by looking at his or her cap, shirt, golf bag and towel. The logos might be smaller, but they are nevertheless present. While most of us are not paid to wear a specific style or brand of clothing the way that professional athletes are, I dare say that we are conscious of dressing in appropriate ways for the various situations in our lives. I do not wear the same clothes when visiting at the hospital that I wear to lead Bible Study at Camp Bethel. Nobody in their right mind would wear the same thing to a job interview that they wear to the gym or to the beach.

Most of us pick up on these social ques about our clothing with little formal instruction. We are given subtle messages from our peers and our elders that either reinforce or challenge the decisions that we have made. And yet, the power of the way that we choose to clothe ourselves communicates messages that others pick up on without even realizing it.

While brand names were not much of a thing before mass advertising came into being, the style and from of one's clothes communicated much about a person even in the Apostle Paul's day. Some of that communication was even codified in law. Wearing a toga with a purple steak in it was a big no no if the person wearing the toga was not a Roman senator. Someone showing up in a threadbare tunic would communicate that the person was a lower class manual laborer or slave.

With such an emphasis on what clothing communicated about a person in Roman society, it is little wonder that when Paul was searching for an image to communicate the transformation that new believers experience in Christ to the Galatian Christians, he settled on the image of clothing. Speaking about this transformation he said, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."[1] While not quite as easy as changing our clothes, putting off the old self and replacing it with both an inner and outer self that was transformed by Christ, gives witness to just how radical of a transformation Paul is imagining. Imagine replacing a threadbare tunic worn down by years of heavy labor with a finely woven tunic. Imagine replacing worn out jeans that are full of holes with a new pair of pants that fit well and do not have any holes in them. This is the image that Paul wants us to show the world. When we are clothed with Christ, our lives metaphorically display a new set of clothing that communicates our changed status to those around us. But before we can dig too deeply into this new set of clothes, we must follow Paul along his path to this illustrative image.

Throughout the book of Galatians, Paul has been writing about the relationship between the law and faith. Much of his ire in his most angry letter is aimed at those who are teaching the Galatians that being a Christian means following all of the ritual laws of the Israelites. At stake in this debate is the basic nature of the Christian faith. Does our salvation come through faith in Jesus, or is it the result of Jesus and something else? In other words, does a person have to become a Jew to follow Jesus? Paul's issues with the Old Testament law are not issues with the law per say as much as with how people are using the law in their lives of faith. If following the law is the primary question of a person's life, what was the point of Jesus's death and resurrection? If we could become righteous by following the law, what is the point of faith?

Paul repeats that point at the beginning of the paragraph that we read today. He said, "Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith could be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith."[2] While there were all sorts of cultural questions about the divisions between Jews and Gentiles in the early Church, at the heart of that division was a theological question: how are human beings made right with God? If human

beings are made right with God by our actions in obeying the law, then the Jewish Christians were somehow better than their fellow believers who were of Gentile background. But if all of us are made right through faith in Christ, if faith in Christ was the only way to be made right with God, then Christians of both Jewish and Gentile background had the same starting point. Both needed the transformation that comes through faith in Christ Jesus. Paul hits this point hard in verses twenty-five and twenty-six whenhe said, "But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to the disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith."

This faith conviction, that all come to God through faith in Christ Jesus regardless of their cultural background, is at the heart of the social transformation that we find in Jesus. For if it is indeed faith that makes us right with God, not our ancestors, not our family connections, not our recognition of the appropriate social ques, not our keeping of the right rituals, then the divisions that so many had held were about separating the righteous from the unrighteous are not only unnecessary, they are indeed a stumbling block to faith. While this boundary line between Jew and Gentile is less prevalent in the church of our time, we have our own divisions that ought to crumble on the back of the conviction that faith in Christ Jesus is what really matters. The division between cradle Christians and adult converts is one such division. The division between those with longstanding family connections, both here in the local congregation and in the Church of the Brethren as a whole, and those without them is another. The divisions that our society so desperately clings to of racial background, country of origin and primary language are a third set of human barriers that should be found wanting when forced to tangle with our conviction that all of us come to Christ Jesus through our own faith in him.

When Paul uses the image of being clothed with Christ, he is imploring us to consider our faith in Christ Jesus as our primary and most meaningful identifying marker. To be clothed in Christ is to relegate all of the other identifying factors; even the ones that our society tells us are tremendously important to secondary status. And what is more, all of us, no matter whether we are cradle Christians or adult converts, no matter our place of birth or ethnicity, are united in this basic entry point into the life of faith. To come to Christ is to be clothed in Christ, full stop. By what

Paul says next, I suspect that he wanted to drive home just how many barriers our clothing with Christ breaks down. Naming several of the most important barriers between human beings in his time, Paul said, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or 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."

When considering identity, one of the great challenges, both of Paul's time and our own is that for all of the lofty language about oneness in Christ, the other identities that we claim do not disappear because we are in Christ Jesus. We do not cease being citizens of our nation, members of our racial or ethnic group, practitioners of our profession or trade, or part of any of the other various identities that we all possess. Instead, if we are taking our faith in Jesus seriously, those other identities become subordinate to the primary identity that we have as followers of Jesus, folks who through the waters of baptism have put on the clothing of Christ. Many of you may have wondered a bit about the image of the stock car driver or professional golfer at the beginning of this sermon. When folks around you look at your life, can they clearly see Jesus? Is the banner of Christ being demonstrated by your metaphorical clothing? Because at the end of the day, what folks see in our lives is far more important than what they see on our shirts. Is our connection with Christ Jesus the primary thing that people see when they look at our lives as individuals? Is the love of Christ Jesus the primary identity that folks see when they look at this congregation? Is the banner of Christ Jesus the first thing that comes to mind when outsiders look at the Church of the Brethren? This is what it means to be clothed in Christ that a person who sees our lives will associate us with Christ Jesus. For if we make our clothing with Christ the primary identity of our lives, those other berries that divide us will become far less important. Amen.