

SERMON: Clothed in Christ  
TEXT: Galatians 3:23-29

I visited my two sisters last week in Minnesota, and I saw my brother, my brother-in-law, and some of my nieces and nephews. It was great to see everyone, but it's my sisters whom I especially enjoy spending time with. We get along well and have a wonderful time: sharing our joys and our sorrows; sharing stories of our wonderful children and how they give us gray hair; sharing laughter and tears, hopes and fears; going shopping, watching movies, eating good food and having a drink or two.

But it wasn't always this way. Carole is the eldest of us three; nine years older than I and seven years older than Emily. She used to have to babysit us when my mom was at work. She wasn't fond of us then, and she didn't keep it a secret. She was a normal teenager who would rather do almost anything else than have to spend time with her little sisters.

But there's another reason, I think, for why Carole was grouchy: my mom dressed all three of us alike. Not all the time, of course. But I have photos of us from those days, in which I look to be about four or five years old, so Carole would have been about 13 or 14. Emily and I are smiling and happy in our matching

shorts and tops, while Carole has that flat expression of a teenager wishing she could disappear. The funny part is that *to this day* – over 50 years later – when the three of us are together, people sometimes ask if we are triplets!

If you've ever been in a large group traveling somewhere together, you may have had matching t-shirts for everyone to wear. Maybe it's a family reunion, or a church group on a mission trip, or the high school band going to an amusement park. Some individuals might not like the color of the t-shirt, but everyone is asked to dress alike so that they can be easily identified by one another. It also sends a message to the world that we're together, that we all belong to this group, and that we're proud have that connection.

In the verses we read from Paul's letter to the Galatians, he is continuing his argument that the law (that is, the Law of Moses) is no longer primary, no longer the standard for faithful living. You see, the Jews who are now believers in Christ, have been comparing themselves to the Gentiles, saying they don't really qualify for this group of new Christians because they have not lived under the law. The men are not circumcised. They don't eat the right foods. They don't follow the purity laws, and so on. But Paul has been teaching that "a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ."

Paul explains that “the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came....”

Like a tutor, someone to help you focus, someone to keep you on track and heading in the right direction. “But now that faith has come,” Paul writes, “we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.”

We don't need to be checking ID's at the door, separating ourselves based on false categories, or making sure that others measure up. Our differences don't matter anymore because Christ came and made us all worthy. “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.” Everybody gets a matching t-shirt, if you will.

When I do a baptism, I like to point out that in this case, *water is thicker than blood*, rather than the other way around. The water of baptism is what makes us all family – Abraham's offspring and brothers and sisters in Christ – whether we're related by blood or not.

There's a wonderful story in a book titled, Good News from North Haven, written by Presbyterian minister, Michael Lindvall. He tells of an elder who requested the baptism of his grandson, whose family was visiting from out of town. The pastor explained that it is best for a child to be baptized in the church where he would be raised. The Session, however, voted unanimously to have the baby baptized in that church. So, it was done the Sunday after Thanksgiving when the whole family was in town.

Lindvall goes on to describe a special baptismal custom of this particular congregation. As the baptism begins, the pastor always asks, "Who stands with this child?" and then the whole extended family of the little one rises and remains standing for the ceremony. After the service that day, a middle-aged woman approached the pastor and commented on the lovely baptism. After a long pause, she said that her daughter, Tina, had just had a baby and was interested in having him baptized. After suggesting that Tina and her husband make an appointment with him, the woman explained that Tina was just eighteen years old and unmarried. She had been confirmed in the church and used to come to the youth group meetings, but was nervous to talk with the pastor.

When he brought the request to the Session, some of the discussion turned to gossip. Everyone in this small town knew who the father was and that he'd joined the military. They also expressed concern that Tina might not stick to the commitment of regular church attendance. "The real problem," Lindvall wrote, "was the picture of the baptism that we all had in our heads: Tina, pimples on her chin, little Jimmy in her arms, big Jimmy long fled to North Carolina, and [Tina's mother], the only one who would stand when the question was asked. It hurt to think of it, but they approved it, of course."

It was the Sunday before Christmas when the baptism took place, and the church was full. When the young mother came forward, "one could not help but remember another baby boy born long ago to a young and unwed mother in difficult circumstances." Tina's mother was sitting in the front pew. She stood slowly and nervously when the pastor asked "Who stands with this child?"

The pastor looked back to his service book to continue, when he became aware of movement in the pews. One by one, the church elders stood up. Then the sixth-grade Sunday school teacher, then a new young couple in the church, and soon the whole church was standing up with little Jimmy.

The scripture reading that morning had been some verses from First John: “See what great love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God.... If we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.... There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” “In that baptism,” wrote Lindvall, “those old words came alive. They were clothed in flesh and everybody saw it.”

Jumping now from baptisms to weddings, my son recently announced his engagement, and the wedding is set for this October. So, I’m already thinking about what I’ll wear. I have succumbed to this temptation despite the fact that what I often preach to couples planning a wedding is that their focus needs to be on the marriage – the days and months and years after the wedding – rather than the ceremony itself. If all their energy goes into what they wear and how they look on that one day, that I’m afraid they’ll lose sight of how they want to present themselves every other day of their life.

In fact, we’re all guilty of this. Too much of the time, we probably put more thought into our outward appearance than into praying and planning and acting with intention about the kind of person we want to be every day. Are we clothing ourselves in Christ? Do we put on patience and kindness and gentleness before we

leave the house every day? Are we checking the mirror for a white smile or a smile that is warm and genuine? Do we cover ourselves with openness and acceptance and generosity?

Is it clear to others that we belong to Christ and that there's room in the family for them, too? Every day, may we be CLOTHED IN CHRIST...to the glory of God!

AMEN.