

Grace to you and peace from our risen Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

So, as you might have guessed, the apostle Paul – who wrote the letter to the Galatians – is really upset with the Christian community in Galatia. He was upset at the beginning of the letter and it's just been building as he goes.

In our reading last week, we learned that the believers in that community had begun following the teachings of some conservative missionaries who'd arrived after Paul had left. And those teachings included Torah law and rules that they didn't need to follow because they hadn't been raised as Jewish.

And, in effect, the practice of following those rules undermined the gift of faith that God had given to the believers – the faith that made them right with God. The understanding that faith is trust – trusting in Jesus for their relationship with God, and living their lives in ways that were consistent with that relationship of trust.

So, instead of having that relationship of trust be the central aspect of their faith, the Christians in Galatia had made the observance of the law as the central mark of their faith.

And so, throughout this letter, Paul reiterates what it means to live a life of faith in God. He begins with the teaching about the relationship of trust. And what we hear today continues that as he talks about the transformation it brings to people's lives. And the way that transformation moves outward from the individual lives of the believers and into the life of the faith community and, eventually, into the world.

And that it's a transformation that can only come from trusting in their relationship with God, because it comes through faith, not by following a bunch of rules. It was critical that the Christians in Galatia understood this not only intellectually, but also in the way that they lived because it was the source of their identity as believers in Jesus.

And their identity as believers in Jesus set them apart because it made everyone in that faith community equal before God.

We take it for granted today, especially here in the US, that anyone can come into a church and become part of its community. We are who we are as individuals, and we come in and participate together in the ministry of the church.

When we see each other outside of here, we greet one another and have conversations. When we do that, whether we're aware of it or not, we acknowledge our shared identity in Jesus.

But at the time Paul wrote this letter, the church was different.

In the community of believers in Galatia – and I'm talking maybe 30-35 people at most; the early Christian faith communities were small. But the people who formed the faith community in Galatia wouldn't have necessarily associated with each other in public.

And I don't mean that they just wouldn't have bumped into each other at the market. Some of them literally would not have associated with each other in public. They would have known a person's social status simply by the clothes they wore, and kept their distance if that person had a lower social standing.

And what Paul needed the people to understand was that, through the transformation that happened in their life of faith, when believers in Jesus become clothed in Christ in baptism, they put on his identity; they become children of God because Jesus is the child of God.

And that identity wasn't limited to the time that they gathered for worship, because Jesus was the source of their identity wherever they went.

Any status that anyone had outside the church didn't extend to privilege in the church. The status that might be given to someone because of their ethnicity, social status, or gender, didn't count in the church, because that isn't where their true identity resides.

In the church, all people have the same status before God and in relation to one another because everyone is dependent on Jesus for their identity and relationship with God. That is, everyone is one in Jesus.

And when Paul says this, he isn't suggesting uniformity – that everyone has to be the same.

Instead, Paul is talking about unity. That even with varied cultural and social backgrounds and experiences, people are brought together in Jesus. And that their identity in Jesus eliminates the barriers and hierarchies that humans create.

And it not only defines who they are as individual believers, it unites them as a Christian community inside the walls of the church and in their daily lives.

When we think about what shapes our identity today, there's no shortage of sources: our skin color, the language we speak, our gender and sexual orientation, the country we were born in, the jobs we work, the subjects we study in school, our family, our friends, our political views and affiliations, and so on.

These "identity shapers" also affect church communities. We ask questions like: How many people are in the pews on a Sunday morning? How many kids are in the Sunday school and the youth group? How many outreach projects are on the calendar? How many mission trips? How many fellowship activities? Is the budget in the black or in the red?

Each of these qualities and characteristics shape who we are as individuals and as faith communities. But when they become barriers or hierarchies between us, we lose track of the One that is the source of who we are. The One that not only defines us, but also unites us across our differences.

In our identity in Jesus, our differences – things like our cultural background, our life experiences, and the things that shape who we are – help us recognize God's transforming work in our lives, and influence how we live into God's promises for the world. Not in ways that divide us, but in ways that affirm we are one people of God.

Using our congregation as an example, we don't only do ministry one way. We don't only make quilts, or only take meals to organizations, or partner with only one organization. We do a bunch of different things and each of us is involved in a different aspect of ministry. And I know some of you participate in multiple aspects of ministry.

We do this because of our differences – our different passions, and the different ways God works through us.

And we do this because of our identity in Jesus. Jesus is the one who brings us together across our differences and unites us as a community. Because in who we are as individuals and as a congregation, Jesus is the source of our identity.

If the apostle Paul were to write a letter to us today, he would most likely remind us that our identity in Jesus doesn't rely on how much money we make or how well we do in school. Our congregation's identity doesn't rely on the number of people on the membership roll or the number of participants in any program.

Paul would remind us, as he did with the Galatians, that our identity starts and ends with Jesus. He would assure us that “in Christ Jesus, [we] are all children of God through faith.”

That for all of the ways who we are is shaped by the world around us – where we're born and our life experiences – there's only one source of our identity in Jesus, and that's Jesus himself.

It's the identity that puts our relationship of trust in God as the central marker of our faith and transforms us as it brings us together as believers in Jesus. It's the identity through which God works in the world, and makes us one.

Alleluia and thanks be to God! Amen.