

*One in Christ, Free for Life* (2June19)  
Galatians 3:1-9,23-29

You'll be shocked to hear that I was called a geek this week.

It partly related to pointing out June 25<sup>th</sup> will be the 489<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a definitive Lutheran statement, including that the church is "the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments administered." In 1530, Lutherans had to present an accounting of their beliefs, and that bit has stood as our main definition of the church ever since.

Now, I don't care if you are also ready to call me a geek. Mostly I care that you know what church is.

So I'll begin by congratulating you: being here involves you in what it means to be the church, as you listen to preaching and receive sacraments, turning again to the waters of baptism and to be fed at the Lord's table. Here you are connected to the crucified Jesus, as he has set forth in proclamation, and as we again proclaim the resurrection with new life breaking free and spreading: Alleluia! Christ is risen!

For one thing, this means we don't define church as a building. So much for "here is the church, here is the steeple." No, church isn't a place you go; it's people you're with.

Another distinction is about all of us here, and far, far beyond. It's not just *an* assembly of believers, but *the* assembly around the world, and across time. We all become the church. And that big, big group is very different than trying to define church as under a pope or a bishop or pastor. For us, leadership doesn't define the church. In fact, the descriptions go on to say I'm not exactly a leader of this congregation, but a servant. I'm here simply because you need to hear preaching and receive sacraments. I'm at your beck and call for that. You ask for somebody to tell you about Jesus, so I do. I'm grateful you even pay me for doing it.

One other distinction seems more often to affect our sense of what church is: we want to

think of church (or believe about ourselves) that it is about doing good and being good.

Not to single them out but illustrating our general notion, in Confirmation this week with students and mentors, thoughts were mainly that church is about being helpful or kind. It means All Are Welcome. Plus we've got a garden.

To be clear: I'm in favor of all of that. I hope those are feelings you have about Advent and the MCC and are stories you tell about us. But it's pretty darn risky as a definition of church.

Similarly, for core identity of church, there's a banner in the Covenant Room with nine statements labeling a version of what it might mean to "be the church," things like protect the environment, care for the poor, fight racism, enjoy this life. Once again, I'm absolutely in favor of those. I hope that it's not just great UCC PR, but fits us in the broader church, too. I want them to be what happens.

But I reiterate: that's risky. It is risky because those may fail. I may get too comfortable in my white supremacy and ignore racism. Or if I leave a light switch on and hop on another plane and don't protect the environment. Or if I don't show much hospitality even though I've said All Are Welcome. Or if the garden gets flooded out. Or if I'm not very helpful or kind. Then that has undone what we'd claimed it meant to be the church.

We'd better pause to consider: if the church is about what we do, it's at risk. And it rapidly becomes pointlessly redundant. Not only can I try protecting the environment apart from church and this group of people, but plenty of people who don't come to church do it a lot better. So that had better not be our definition.

So instead of church being something we do, let's realize it mainly happens to us. Instead of making our actions or attitudes the center of church, it is really about Jesus. It is what God is doing for us in Jesus, being in relationship, reaching out, renewing us. And then we're aware that the main place church can happen and we receive faith is here in worship.

If it's not about what we do, but about what God gives us in Jesus, we also understand the historic emphasis on his death and resurrection. It doesn't neglect the life and ministry of Jesus, but *is* a prioritizing distinction. Again, if we thought church were mainly learning what Jesus did so we could try to go and do likewise, we'd be sorely disappointed, disenchanted, and misdirected. Death and resurrection isn't something we can do. This is proclamation of a new reality.

This is what's going on in Galatians. Faith vs. a category Paul names "works of the law." We could substitute in "things we do," all the shoulds and oughts, stuff supposed to make us feel right, but with false confidence on one hand and horrible accusation too often on the reverse.

For such instructions, as a kid "Be nice to your sister," was an indicator insisting I *wasn't* being very nice, and it still met a minimal response from me.

More largely, Paul asks why we are so thoughtlessly beguiled, seduced, or bewitched to think that's how it should work, with rules to follow and imagining we can prove we're doing it right. Here in 21<sup>st</sup> Century North America, it's clearly because that's the water we're swimming in. You're not only told to be nice to your little sister, but how to apply lotion to avoid wrinkles and keep cavities at bay, plus behaviors for allegedly avoiding cancer. There's what kind of car will make you macho, or safe in bad weather. What is the right diet is followed by what is now the righter diet, and then what is really the right diet. Guilty feelings come for failing at being a better partner or parent or child or employee, with an abundance of ideas and suggestions for improving. There's what you're supposed to be in charge of to avoid getting arrested or needing an abortion. There's how you are successful in life, with grades and resumes and five year plans. Not to mention phone plans.

We might notice it's an exceptional privilege to imagine we have capacity to address those things and many more, which we wouldn't in another place or time. But it's also an incredible burden, destined for disappointment, fraught with

failure. Our self-doubt ironically signals the foolishness of such searching for self-confidence. What we try to do for reassurance leaves us all-the-more susceptible to despair.

It's not *entirely* negative. There are good things to do; it was right to be told not to hit my sister.

But there's something a little childish about being mesmerized into all of it.

That goes with the word "babysitter" in my re-translation of this Bible passage. The actual Greek word is "pedagogue," which we associate with a teacher. But originally this person was on the way *to* school. It literally means "child-leader," A pedagogue would walk a child to school, keeping them safe and out of trouble along the way. Kind of like daycare outings when children have to hold onto a rope in single file. That's what Paul says the law is like. A babysitter along the way.

With that, maybe you have the sense why this isn't ideal. You've got plenty that is vying for your attention, claiming to be the right rope to hold onto to get you safely across life's streets and keep you from straying too far. You've got a whole herd of competing babysitters who want to watch over you and tell you how incapable you are.

You certainly don't need the church to be one more version of that, to come here expecting that we are just another babysitter, another pedagogue, another set of rules to live by and to-do lists for a supposed happy, healthy, productive life. You don't need it, and you'd have no reason to trust it in such a competitive marketplace anyway.

What's more, that's not how God is going to treat you. Sure, motivations and coercions and guidelines are helpful in their proper place. But God isn't going to keep treating you like a toddler with a bad attention span.

Instead, God has freed you to live. You are clothed in Christ, trying on unlimited resurrected life. God puts the Holy Spirit into you through this worship service to go out, not just to follow rules or be confined into small roles. You have inherited the blessing. You receive the gift of faith, bestowing on you the inheritance from God.

This is last will and testament language in the Bible reading. God's estate has been conferred to you, not only as a steward for mid-level management, but as the full inheritor, the owner, the responsible adult.

Still more stunning, God is doing this, conferring this identity on you, regardless of who you are or have been or thought you were.

There is no insider to this blessing, as in that old category of neither Jew nor Greek; all are God's people.

There is neither slave nor free, meaning your social status doesn't confer it. Those were citizenship categories, of who had a voice in the nation. We could still say you aren't entitled to more or less as citizen vs. undocumented immigrant or refugee. And if God is for it, who can be against?

Then, "there is not male and female." I couldn't find explanations, but I think maybe Paul switches terms from "neither/nor" to not male "and" female to highlight creation story language from Genesis, that "God created them male and female, in the image of God." That was already a strong statement: all genders are created in the image of God and seen as very good. But maybe Paul is even more saying you're not just living into the old gender-assigned roles. And in an old culture where only male children—only sons—could inherit the father's property, Paul is negating that restriction. All of you inherit God's blessing, God's promise, this life in Jesus, this adulthood in faith.

The gift of these expansive redefining relationships given by God's relationship with us is embodied in the Immigrant Creed that Sonja shared in the Facebook group this week, and which we'll use as our statement of faith in just a moment. And notice again it's about God and not about what we do.

This is what God is creating right here in this worship service. This is what God is doing in the church always, around the world, through all time, proclaiming an assurance, to free you not only from oughts and shoulds, but freeing you to live.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

NSRV (Nick's Special Re-done Version) of Galatians 3:1-9, 23-29

You thoughtless Galatians, who has beguiled you? Wasn't the crucified Jesus Christ set forth in proclamation before your eyes? 2 I only want to know this from you: is it from works of the law you received the Spirit, or from faith preached? 3 Are you so unthinking, beginning with the Spirit but now ending with the flesh? 4 Did you suffer so much for nothing? (If indeed it was for nothing.) 5 So is the Spirit given to you and powerful works done among you because of works of the law, or faithful preaching?

6 Just as Abraham "had confidence in God, and it was considered to him as righteousness," 7 you know the faithful are the children of Abraham. 8 The scripture foresaw that by faith God would set right the nations, and proclaimed the good news beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you all the nations shall be blessed." 9 So the faithful are blessed with the faithfulness of Abraham.

23 Before faith came, we were being kept confined under the law, until faith was destined to be unveiled. 24 Thus the law was our babysitter until Christ came, when we would be set right from faith. 25 So faith came, and we are no longer under a babysitter: 26 you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus, 27 and all you baptized into Christ are dressed in Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And since you are of Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, inheriting what has been promised.

from The Immigrant's Creed

(Jose Luis Casal, General Missioner, Tres Rios Presbytery, PCUSA)

I believe in Almighty God, who guided the people in exile and in exodus, the God of Joseph in Egypt

and Daniel in Babylon, the God of immigrants.

I believe in Jesus Christ, a displaced Galilean, born away from his home, who fled his country with his parents when his life was in danger, and suffered the oppression of a tyrant of a foreign power, who was persecuted, tortured, and unjustly condemned to death. But on the third day, this scorned Jesus rose from the dead, to offer us citizenship in heaven.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the eternal immigrant from God's kingdom among us, who speaks all languages, lives in all countries, and reunites all races.

I believe that the church is the secure home for all who constitute it, the diverse Communion of the Saints who have the same purpose.

I believe in the reconciliation, which identifies us more than does language, nationality, [social status, or gender].

I believe that in the resurrection God unites us as one people in which all are distinct and all are alike at the same time. Beyond this world, I believe in Life Eternal in which all will be citizens of God's kingdom, which will never end. Amen