

“The Way It Is Now”

Do you have a good side? You know, when you're getting your picture taken, do you have a preference for which side of yourself faces the camera? Maybe it's with you like it is for some folks who I've heard say, "I don't have a good side. All my sides are equally bad!" We are more aware of how we come across in pictures because cell phones increase our opportunity to be photographed. If we're not taking selfies, others have their phones in hand, ready to get a picture at family gatherings, special events or even when we're doing the mundane tasks of everyday life. Added to this is the way technology makes it possible for the sharing of pictures by posting to social media. Our images are no longer tucked away in some dusty photo album. Now they are out there for everyone to see. So, we are probably more conscious or more self-conscious about what the camera captures. It's human nature to want to put our best side forward. Without thinking, we push back the hair or tuck in the gut when there's a photographer nearby. Every now and then we come across a photo that's labeled, "Before and After." In the old days of print media, we'd find these kinds of pictures in newspapers or magazines but the digital world has them, too. The photo is labeled, "Before and After" and this is usually an advertisement for some miracle product that promises incredible results. The "Before and After" points to a weight-loss program or some makeover process, and the difference can be dramatic. Changes like that seem too good to be true, and that's why the advertizer gives us the pictures. The evidence is right in front of us. Here's the Before and here's the After. It's hard to dispute.

In a deeply more profound and important way, Paul writes about how Christ changes us. The change is dramatic and, according to the apostle, the evidence is indisputable. Paul writes with great confidence about this. The truth about the change Christ works in us can not be denied. As we come to his letter to the Galatian church, we realize, once more, that understanding what Paul writes is not the easiest task. It's not easy but it is worth the effort. because the more we learn from the apostle the more we appreciate how his message involves us. Paul wants us to share his certainty about the difference between the way we were before Christ and who we are now, after Christ. What has changed? What is different in this Before and After picture? Paul names it in our reading for today, "in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith." (Gal. 3:26) The result is dramatic and some would say it's too good to be true, but the picture does not lie. In Christ, we are all children of God. The implication, of course, is that before Christ all were not included, at least this was the assumption of the religious community. The way Paul gets at this is by naming a conflict in the early church that centered on what he refers to as "the law." Before Christ, the religious community in Galatia had a particular way of thinking about life with God. Before Christ, they held to the religious assumption that in order for God's promises to apply people had to become acceptable to God. The law, based on the traditional teachings of Moses, mapped out certain behaviors and religious practices that positioned a person in good standing. It's like putting our best side forward. The assumption was that when God sees the effort, when the practice of one's life leaves no doubt as to the purity and rightness of one's heart, then God makes good on the promise. In other words, when we measure up, when we make ourselves worthy, God sees the evidence of our goodness and will bless us with a redeeming love. That's the before picture, it is all about deserving God's blessing. Paul says Christ Jesus changes all of that. After Christ, it's not about what we deserve but about what God graciously gives. After Christ, the focus is not on the level of goodness we achieve but an unwavering focus on the goodness of God. After Christ, the possibility of those who are embraced by God's love is wide open. In the Before picture, as Paul describes it, there are clear lines that determine who is acceptable and who is not. In the After picture, every line fades away and that's why Paul writes there is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male or female, "in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith."

Every time we come to Paul's teaching about how Christ connects us to each other I remember the story an old rabbi taught his students one day. The rabbi gathered his class and asked them, "How can you tell when the night has ended and the day has begun?" The students looked at each other and one of them said, "Has the day begun when you see an animal in the distance and you can tell whether it is a sheep or a dog?" "No," answered the rabbi. Another student responded, "Do we know night is over when we can look at a tree in the distance and tell whether it's a fig tree or a peach tree?" "No," said the rabbi. He looked at the group and said, "The answer as to when day begins still eludes you." Finally the group demanded, "Then when is it, teacher? Tell us, how can we know when the night has ended? How can we know when the day has begun?" The rabbi paused and then said, "Day begins when you can look on the face of any man or woman and see that it is your sister or your brother, because if you cannot see this, it is still night." Christ is the light of the world. The light shines when we look upon the face of another and see our sister or brother. Paul teaches that if we only see the differences among us a new day has not yet begun. This

is Paul's point. The new day is here. Christ ushers in a new life and a new way. It begins when we see our oneness in God and how God's love includes us all.

Sometimes folks wonder if the teachings of the bible are still relevant. Anyone who thinks this should read the letters of Paul, and specifically his letter to the church in Galatia. As it was in the ancient world so it is in ours. We use labels as a way of drawing lines and identifying ourselves. The political world does this all the time. We identify as either Republican or Democrat, conservative or liberal. The labels align us with certain groups of people and our tendency is to see our group as the winners. The world of the church does the same. We are either a Progressive or a Traditionalist, or aligned with this theological camp or the other. There is the sense of winners and losers here, too. What Paul is saying is that that is the old way of thinking. The old structures saw the divisions but now there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, conservative or liberal because a New Age, a New Day has dawned. We are in Christ now. This means that before we affiliate with any particular group or agenda our identity is found in Christ and if any distinction must be made let it be this, we are all children of God now.

I mentioned the way technology makes it easy to share our image with the world. One of the dangers of our digital age is identity theft. There are services that protect our identity, systems that prevent others from compromising who we are. Paul doesn't want anything to compromise our spiritual identities. The time is now to be vigilant in protecting who we are in Christ. Try putting this into practice this week. When you look at another person or a group of persons, and you feel your mind starting to make a judgement about them or moving to make an assumption about who they are or what they are not, first remind yourself of who you are in Christ. Paul would want us to remember that the light of God is shining on us, not because of something they or we have done or failed to do. The light shines because there is no darkness that can dispel the love Christ shares with the world. Am I saying that Paul said there are no laws that apply now. No. We stay ordered and intentional in our lives of faith but the law that supersedes all others is the law of love. Jesus made that abundantly clear. And so, our work in the world is not about drawing more lines or separating more people. We are in Christ now and all of us are God's children. That's the way it is.

This is the picture we carry. It's not the easiest way. It's tough at times, but who we are in Christ is solid and true. Let the world be clear about who it is that makes us who we are, now and always. Amen.