

Identity is an important thing. We human beings expend a great deal of energy establishing and maintaining our identities. Who am I?

Well, I have a name. But since there are other people running around with that same name, I also have numbers to identify myself. The State of Texas gives me one number on my driver's license. The United States of America gives me another number on my social security card.

And yet, when people meet me, they usually don't look at my driver's license to try to figure out who I am. Instead, they ask about other things. You know these questions. We use them all the time to get a sense of someone else's identity. The questions start early.

Even before you can talk, people ask your parents, "Is it a boy or a girl? What was their birth weight?"

As you get a bit older, and you can answer for yourself, the questions become: "How old are you? What school do you go to? What grade are you in? Who's your teacher, or who are your parents? What do you want to be when you grow up?"

When we're even older the questions change to, "What do you do for a living? Are you married? Do you have any children? Where did you grow up?"

The object of all of these questions is to try to gather data, to fill in our picture of who someone else is.

We also supply our own data. We try to establish our own identities with supplemental data. I have this ethnic heritage. I belong to this political party. I have these hobbies. I root for this team. I'm interested in these issues.

We use all of these myriad factors to establish our identities. In 21st century America, we especially worry about which group we're a part of. We often spend a lot of energy trying to maintain our sense of who we are.

And yet, in our lesson from the Letter to the Galatians this morning, we hear something vastly different about identities. Paul is telling us something extremely radical about our identities.

The words we read this morning from Galatians are really amazing: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."

That's an incredible image. In baptism, you put on Christ as you would put on clothes. You clothe yourself with Christ. You take on a new nature. You take on a new identity. You take on Christ's identity

And when we become baptized, when we gain a new identity, the old categories no longer apply to us. Paul says that "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."

That's an amazing thing to hear. In Jesus, all of the categories that we spend so much time and energy placing ourselves in have no meaning. Our ethnicity, our gender, our jobs, our socioeconomic status—all of these things become superfluous.

We become children of God. We become joint heirs in God's kingdom. Through our baptisms we become one with Christ, and Christ's very nature and identity envelops our own.

And yet, there is a paradox here. Through our baptisms we have put on Christ. And yet, trying to live into the full meaning of our identity as Christians is more difficult. Living into the fullness of Christ's identity is not easy.

And there's another layer here that was clear to Paul's audience that we can miss. It's a message about needing to grow up. It's about needing to gain spiritual maturity.

Here's where the hidden message comes in. Paul says that before faith, the law was our "disciplinarian." The word he uses is very specific.

It's *paidagogos*. We have related English words like pedagogue or pedagogy, which mean teacher or teaching. But in the ancient Roman Empire, the *paidagogos*, the pedagogue was not a teacher. He was a male slave put in charge of overseeing the boys. He was something like a male nanny—he would guard the boys of the household and be responsible for their conduct and their safety. He was also like a human school bus. One of his jobs was to walk the boys to school, and make sure they arrived. And then he was supposed to be waiting later in the day to walk them back home.

A boy would be under the authority of his pedagogue until the day he went through a ceremony marking the transition from boyhood to manhood. That ceremony was putting on a garment, the *toga virilis*, the toga of manhood. When a boy was around 15 or 16, the boy's father would decide that it was time for him to undergo this ceremony.

The donning of the adult toga, the toga of manhood, meant that a boy was no longer under the authority of his pedagogue. Instead he was legally a man. Before he put on the toga, a boy could not inherit property. Afterwards, he could. Before he put on the toga, a boy had no public responsibilities. Afterwards, he was expected to participate in government and in military training to defend the empire. Putting on the toga marked the end of childhood and the beginning of manhood.

But it's interesting. The Greco-Roman world had this ceremony. But they also wrote extensively about the need for young men to live into their manhood. They had an expression for these young men, the *novus togatus*, the newly togaed young men. They cautioned these young men to live into the status their outer garment gave them. Yes, they had new freedom and new status, but that new freedom and status came with great responsibilities.

And so many Greco-Roman writers would give advice about how young men could and should live into their adult responsibilities. They shouldn't wear a toga on the outside, and yet act like a boy on the inside. In our culture we would say they should "man up" or "put on their big boy pants." They should live into the true manhood their toga confers upon them.

As one scholar says,
"Although donning the *toga virilis* turned the 'boy' into a 'man', the new stage of life into which he entered was a precarious one... The new *togatus* required moral exhortation not to abuse this new freedom for foolish allure, receiving, then, the *togas virilis* for nothing."¹

Not only did the young man need to "assume the outward appearance of an adult male" but he also had to "assume the character and qualities" of an adult male.²

And Paul uses this same kind of language and same kind of argument throughout the Epistle to the Galatians. He is exhorting new Christians to man-up, to grow up, to live into their responsibilities as Christians. He is telling Christians to live into the fullness of their identity in Christ, to be spiritually mature.

They have put on Christ like a garment, just as a boy would put on the toga of manhood. Thus they need to assume the character and qualities reflected by their garment. They need to live like Christ, not just outwardly in their appearance, but inwardly in their behavior.

It's about growing up. It's about seeking spiritual maturity.

Growing in spiritual maturity is a process. And since the goal is to live more and more like Jesus Christ, it is a goal that we will not reach in this lifetime. But it's a goal to strive for, to grow into. We need to be more like Jesus, not just outwardly, but inwardly as well.

It's a life-long process. After all, you don't stop learning on the day you graduate from high school. You don't arrive at a full understanding of what it means to be married on the day of your wedding.

And you don't become like Christ on the day you are baptized or on the day you make a mature profession of faith. Such watershed moments, such milestones are merely markers of a continuing journey, not a destination which has been reached.

Paul tells us in Galatians, you have been baptized into Christ and you have clothed yourselves with Christ. But like a young man donning the toga of manhood, you have to begin to live in a different way to make sure your inner nature matches your outer appearance.

¹ J. Albert Harrill, "Coming of Age and Putting on Christ: The *Toga Virilis* Ceremony..." *Novum Testamentum*, July 2002

² *ibid.*

And it is a lifelong process. A decade later, Paul will be the first to say that he himself has not attained spiritual maturity. Instead, he says, he "strain(s) forward" and "press(es) on toward the goal" of living more like Jesus Christ.³

So how do we seek spiritual maturity? The classic answers are to engage in spiritual disciplines: prayer, scripture reading, worship, service to others, stewardship. And none of these things will produce instant results, any more than one afternoon in the gym will get you in shape. It takes continuing effort to strain forward and press on toward the goal of being more like Jesus Christ.

So man up.
Put on your big boy pants.
Put on your adult toga.
Clothe yourself with Christ.

Pray. Study. Worship. Give. Serve.

Seek to live into your identity as a mature follower of Jesus Christ.

³ Philippians 3:13-14