We've been learning about God's grace as we've looked at parts of the narrative called Acts and the letter called Galatians. We'll continue with Galatians during August after Pastor Ginger returns, and we'll look today at another part of Galatians.

Three weeks ago Duncanville made the Dallas area news with the conviction of a woman on 78 counts of identity theft – three times as many as she was convicted for in 1994. This time around, I happened to know two of the victims personally, and I imagine many of you here this morning know some of the victims. Perhaps you have been one of the victims of identity theft yourself, or have been in the past.

I was tempted to share with you some of the many jokes and cartoons that have risen up on the theme of identity theft, but I've decided to spare you. Maybe we can trade some afterwards. "Identity theft" as we talk about it today usually means the old crime of pretending to be someone else, but enhanced by the new technological tools we have available, tools available to the criminal as well as to the rest of us. Probably the earliest case most of us can think of is Jacob's stealing Esau's identity, with their mother's connivance and even initial suggestion, in order to con their father Isaac. He managed to drain Esau's blessing account at the Bank of Isaac just before Esau came back and discovered the theft and reported it to Isaac. But there was no identity theft insurance, so it was too late.

Identity theft involves one kind of our identity: Who do other people think you are? That's an important kind of identity, the kind Jesus was getting after when he asked his closest followers, "Who do people say I am?", and then, "What about you? Who do you think I am?" Even more important is our identity in God's eyes: Who does God think you are? And third, there's the identity reflected in the title I've given this talk, "Who do you think you are?" The identity in identity theft is individual identity, like "I'm the owner of this house/bank account", or "I'm the father of the kid that jus scored his fourth touchdown tonight". But probably more often, identity had more to do with belonging to a group—not so much "Who are you?", but "What kind of a person are you?"

Identity of one kind or another has been coming up a lot in our lessons of faith and trust in the last few months. Rahab of Jericho, perhaps out of a combination of faith and self-preservation, chose to identify with the Israelites and their God, rather than keep to her identity as a Canaanite. (Some decades later, as the mother of Boaz, she became the second mother-in-law of Ruth, whose choice to leave her Moabite identity, with all its parts of land, family, and god, and identify with Naomi and her land, family, and god, is well known even though we didn't focus on Ruth explicitly.) In both Rahab's and Ruth's cases, their belonging to one group rather than another was paramount: from now on, consider me one of the Israelites, not one of the Canaanites; or an Israelite, not a Moabite. On the other hand, a lot of the interaction between Joseph and his brothers in Egypt revolved around Joseph's concealing (and later revealing) his individual identity as their next-to-youngest brother, letting them bungle along in the belief that his only identity relevant to them was: he's the one who holds all the cards in our negotiations for grain and even for freedom.

What about Joseph's father, and his major identity change much earlier, reflected in the change from 'Jacob' to'Israel'? That seems more like the "belonging" kind of identity, and was at God's initiative: "From now on, Israel, your new name will remind yourself and others that you belong to my people—in fact, in one sense, you're the beginning of my people. I see you that way, and I want others to see you that way, and I want you to see yourself that way."
Then just two and three weeks ago we looked together at Saul's dramatic identity change, from the best Jew possible, 110% Jew—to the point of being a leader in suppressing the Jesus heresy—to becoming himself a follower of Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah. The change in how he saw himself, and how God saw him, came a lot faster than the change in his identity in the eyes of others—Ananias and other Christians had good reason to be skeptical of his change, and God appeared to Ananias to overcome this obstacle. Maybe it's not surprising, then, that a lot of what Paul is arguing and pleading with the Galatians about really comes down to their identity. To give his argument and plea more credibility, he starts off the letter with a lot about his identity not only as a Christian, but as an apostle who has been privileged with special revelation from God, and with authority, in Jesus Christ. Then he gets to the issue that prompts his letter, which is essentially Christian identity: what does it take to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus? What does it take for God to see you as one of his, in Christ? How much like a Jew do you have to be?

The Church had already struggled with the question, "Can non-Jews be saved through Christ? Can they be part of God's chosen people?—'Christians'?"—though that's more how we would put the question today than how they would, for whom "Christian" was an often derogatory nickname invented by others, part of how others assigned them an identity. Their Bible, the Jewish scriptures, what we now usually call the Old Testament, contained plenty of indications that other people than descendants of Israel, son of Isaac, son of Abraham could be part of God's people. Even their classic story of miraculous deliverance from slavery in Egypt talked about a large number of others—the "mixed multitude" or "large crowd of other people" mentioned in Exodus 12:38—who joined themselves to the Israelites. And their psalm that we read as Psalm 87 today talks about Philistines, Phoenicians from Tyre, "Nubians" (Sudanese) and others some day being counted as having been born in God's special place among his special people, Jerusalem! And we may recall God's declaration in Isaiah 19, lumping Israel together with, of all peoples, Egypt and Assyria: "This is the blessing the LORD of Hosts will give: 'Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my possession.'"

But most of the Jews of the first century had not really taken these hints to heart. We see this dramatically, even violently, in the story of Jesus' reading from Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth, and claiming that his presence and ministry among them was fulfilling what Isaiah had foretold. The crowd was impressed, and hung on his every word. But after he reminded them of two other parts of their Bibles in which God favored Gentiles over Jews, they forgot their wonder and became so enraged they tried to kill him. Another time (John 8), when talking with some Jews who had in some sense "believed in him", he acknowledged that they were descendants of Abraham, then turned right around and said, "But actually, from the way you behave, you show that your real father is not Abraham, but the devil." And again they started to pick up rocks to kill him. And before all that (Matt. 3:9), John the Baptist had already warned

his listeners, "Don't trust in your ancestry. If God feels like it, he could produce descendants of Abraham from these stones here—having Abraham as your ancestor is no big deal when it comes to your identity before God, whether he sees you as one of his or not."

Well, eventually some of the Jews of Jesus' day became his followers—some before he was executed and then raised by God to life again, many more through the teaching and example of the apostles and then of other followers of Jesus. And in becoming Christians, these Jews did not leave behind everything they had been thinking as Jews. The idea that descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob have a privileged place in God's heart still had strong roots in their thinking. So once again it took some special action on God's part [on a par with the voice and light that overwhelmed Saul on the way to Damascus], a triple vision and voice to Peter about being commanded to eat unclean foods and then a voice telling him to go with the Gentiles that were knocking at the door for him downstairs. With that divine help to overcome Peter's Jewish heritage about who could be God's and who couldn't, the Church did come up with the answer, yes, you can be a Christian even if you aren't a Jew. You don't have to be a descendant of Abraham and Sarah.

But the question kept coming up. The church leaders called a meeting in Jerusalem and listened to Peter's report about God's bringing the Roman army officer Cornelius and his family to himself in Christ. They concluded that their own Bible, the OT, taught that Gentile Christians did not have to follow the law of Moses. But now some people had been telling the Galatian Christians otherwise.

The question Paul is writing about in Galatians is, If you're not a Jew, and want to be a Christian, be identified as a Christian by others and by God, how much do you have to also be a Jew? Do you have to eat kosher? If you're a man, do you have to be circumcised? Do you have to frequent the local synagogue? Do you have to obey all the rest of the law given to the Jews through Moses?

Of course, your identity is not only your relationship to God, but also your belonging to his people, his children, or not. Or to put it another way, any one of us has many identities. To take the example I know best, myself: I'm an American, a kid brother, a senior, a Christian, a New Yorker, a man, a husband, a father, a grandfather, a member of this church, a linguist, a speaker of English,.... Some of these are not very important identities to me – like "New Yorker" or "kid brother". Others are supremely important: my identity as a Christian is more who I am than my being an American or a senior or a member of this church or any of my other identities. Others I have not mentioned may be important to you, like how big your salary is or being a native-born Texan (or not).

For the Galatians that Paul was writing to, the issue seems to have been a combination of religious and ethnic identity. Not easy to separate—after all, ethnic identity is usually made up of, or overlaps with, a lot of other identities—like race, where you were born (in Jerusalem!), who are your important ancestors (like Abraham for the Jews of Jesus' and Paul's day), what holidays mean a lot to you (Fourth of July, Cinco de Mayo, July 20 [Colombian Independence Day today!], Solomons Island—July 7, Passover), what are the special foods that carry a lot of

sentimental attachment for you, your language, your religion. I won't even try to define ethnicity here. I'll just venture that Paul is saying, "Forget ethnicity! Forget Jewishness! These things are OK, but they aren't what define you as a person, as who you are in Christ. What counts is, God has saved you by His grace, through Jesus' faithful obedience, and through your trust in him. Count on that—his grace! Not anything else, like your ethnicity, wealth, synagogue or church attendance, tithing, your parents' religion, your being a pretty good person.

So that's the first important thing about our identity: trust God's grace, not anything else, not anybody else. And the second thing is the other side of that: what goes for you goes for me and for everybody else: Accept your brothers and sisters in Christ with as much grace and mercy and forgiveness as God has displayed to you. Don't let anybody's ethnicity, or gender, or socio-economic class, or education level, or any of these other minor identities, categories we stick each other in—get in the way.

OK, we've talked so far about God identifies us as his, how we should see ourselves that way, and each other that way. But how do others see us? Do they recognize us as God's children by his grace? How do you usually recognize, identify somebody as the child of somebody else? Mostly by resemblance—do they look like their mom or dad? Do they talk in a similar way, behave like them? (Yes, I know that teens show us how different from your parents you can act for a few years; but eventually people will still see in you the same mannerisms they see in your parents—so be warned!)

At any rate, seeing ourselves as God's children should and can be a strong motivation to do our best to be like him—loving, giving, forgiving, patient—and that in turn should help others see us as his. Put negatively, Paul says to Timothy, "Let everyone who calls on the name of the Lord turn away from wickedness." Put positively, Jesus said, Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. 36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." And again, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." So that's a third point to hold onto about our identity in Christ: we are God's children, so let's act like it—out of love for our Father, let's' do our best by His grace to be like Him!

But what about our other identities? That deserves another whole talk itself, but let me close by hastening to correct a misunderstanding my remarks may have created: Our being first and foremost a child of God does not do away with our other identities, but enhances them, and makes it possible for them to eventually be all that they should be. We are still male or female, old or young, Anglo or Hispanic or African-American or Korean, American or Brit or Colombian, married or formerly married or never married . . . In Christ, God empowers us to become the best kind of man or woman, the best kind of Anglo or Hispanic or African-American, the best kind of Democrat or Republican, the best kind of parents or children, the best kind of seniors or teens. Not in spite of our identity in Christ, but precisely because of it. In making us his children, God lives in us by his Spirit and makes us free to be all that he has intended us to be—for our pleasure and for his. Amen.