

One Body in Christ
Sermon for the 17th Sunday after Trinity
Sermon Text: Galatians 3:26-29

For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

Ali grew up in Iran. As such, it was automatically written in his identification papers that he is a Muslim. Ali never questioned this – for him and for his family, it was a certainty that they were Muslims, just like it was for generations before them. There was also no reason to question this fact because Islam simply belonged to daily life like everything else. But later on in his life, doubt rose up in Ali. He saw terrible things at various protests, some of his friends were arrested and even killed – all in the name of God. It was crystal clear to Ali that God also has a hard and uncompromising side. His grandpa had always said that man must adapt to God and not God to man. But the terrible violence and the many deaths that Ali saw didn't seem to correspond to the will of God, but rather to a corrupt nation that was intent on manipulating or oppressing people. In the end, Ali, like many others, fled to Europe. In Europe, many things were different than in Iran and he adjusted to the conditions in Europe. For the first time in his life, everything that was previously unimaginable seemed possible. He could pretty much do anything in Europe, even change his religion. So he joined a baptism class and started to read the Bible. He read things in the Bible that were entirely unknown to him. He learned that the 10 Commandments are a standard that man cannot shake. Individuals can't twist the matter in their heads and make excuses such as: "Everyone does that!" He also learned that you can't bargain with God or say something like this: "since I committed this sin, I will do something good so that God is satisfied again!" He learned that there absolutely nothing people can do to heal their relationship with God. Ali thought that people either overestimated themselves or, on the other hand, excessively underestimated God and His commandments, which they still do. Ali was still far from reaching his goal with his questions. Yet, there was a big turning point in his life. That was when he came to know Christ. When he read about this Christ in the New Testament, he realized that Jesus was speaking to him personally. Christ told him that he just had to come, Ali didn't even have to give up his culture or his upbringing, he just needed to come to Christ, just as he is because Christ would stand by his side. Christ wouldn't simply push aside God's Commandments or invalidate them but would take the full force of the uncompromising law upon Himself on the cross. So the day came when Ali came to church with a pounding heart to be baptized, baptized into this Christ who spoke to his heart. Now not only Ali from a tiny village in Iran would be standing there, but Jesus Himself would be there in his life too. Christ would now be a part of Ali and this Jesus would now be the measuring point of his whole life. As a baptized Christian, Ali now went to church regularly. There he not only heard his own language, but also the German language. Much of the service was still strange and foreign to him, he didn't fully understand many of the things that people did in the service. Yet he saw that the German members of the congregation were also happy that there were people from many cultures and languages among them. But life in the Christian congregation with other cultures wasn't just full of rainbows and flowers. Sometimes, misunderstandings came up due to the language. But sometimes there was also anger because the habits of the Germans simply weren't the same as those of the Persians. Once, there was real anger, so much so that a member of the congregation said the following sentence: "Yes, it is all true that we are one in Christ, but nevertheless the culture seems to speak much louder than Christ. Culture therefore seems to be stronger than Christ!"

Everything that Ali experienced and what we as a mixed language congregation have experienced is normal and resembles the experience of the very first churches. When Paul writes: “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female...” he doesn’t mean that all of the social backgrounds in which we find ourselves will simply be leveled out. It is precisely because Paul addresses these things that he seems to know that these are exactly the things that shape our lives in this world. Paul didn’t demand that men become women or slaves become free men, nor would he demand today that Persians become Germans or that Germans become Persians. We can’t deny it: people are made differently. And we are all different and foreign to other people. Our childhood, upbringing, and language stand like a concrete block between us and others. Experiences and values clash violently and there is a danger that we forget who we really are. From the fictional story about Ali, it’s clear that he too can’t simply put his culture aside. But what defines him is the living Christ Himself, who becomes a reality in his life. Perhaps we can imagine the two sides of a coin – there are different pictures on the two sides, but we are still talking about a coin. And the coin corresponds to a certain value that can’t be ignored. Even if there are different pictures on them. **“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”** The old cloak of culture and language can’t just be imagined away. It’s still there. But what defines us is the value of the human being and this value was determined by Christ Himself. We have been bought at a high price through Christ. And when we are baptized, we have put on this Christ. From now on, Christ defines us and no one else. That’s why I can’t accept that culture is stronger than Christ! Everything comes from Christ and we want to be defined by Him and no one else! Culture is not stronger because we will leave it behind at some point and, together with the many nations, enter our eternal home in Christ. But even now we have our eyes focused on this unity that will then be granted to us. That’s why the Bible says very clearly here: In Christ there is no difference, in Christ we are one. That’s why we also drink from one cup and eat from the one body of Christ. Even if all the differences become clear again after the service. It can’t be denied that living together as Christians outside the church doors is sometimes more difficult than inside. These problems were already present in the New Testament. That’s why we must not trivialize or ignore these things. Yet the unity in Christ compels us to make this unity and love of Christ clearer among ourselves. We should tackle the challenges courageously and do our very best with creativity and love to understand others outside the church walls. In our congregation, we try to do this through personal conversations, as well as visits and meetings. Only through personal encounters can we understand and respect a person as an individual. Without these encounters and moments, we have to fall back on the old prejudices. This is easy to do but fundamentally wrong. It is easy but wrong to use or to even think a sentence that starts with the following opening words: “The Iranians are.... vs. The Germans are.... It is wrong because, on the one hand, it’s not true and, on the other hand, it is pointless. This kind of prejudice cements the other person in my head and leaves no room for their own individuality. It’s no wonder that the other person then spouts a prejudice back at me. But when we meet someone, we express that we are in the same boat. It’s not just the other person who has to change, integrate, or adapt, but we accept the responsibility of our differences and carry it together on several shoulders. It’s important that both of us set out on the journey and somehow meet in the middle. Together on the journey, we also discover that the other person not only has a right to be different, but also enriches our congregation. Thank God new members of the congregation will never become clones of the old members. That won’t happen because we are individuals. People from Iran, Volkmarisdorf, South Africa, America, or somewhere else can’t simply change their skin and become like all the other members of the Holy Trinity congregation in Leipzig. Perhaps the beauty of it is that a third option is possible – that we are both accepted and loved by Christ in our differences and can therefore love the other through Christ. Especially in our differences! Only the Holy Spirit can give us something like that! May God grant us this grace. Amen.