It is a fabled story – a legend, really – of a group of radical visionaries, rag-tag rebels, educated elites (or some combination of all of the above) who somehow managed to get together and write such a poetic and powerful verse as this: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” It is hard to grow up in this country or have come to call it home and not be stirred by the Declaration of Independence. Crafted initially by a committee including the revolutionary likes of John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston, Thomas Jefferson is considered the primary author of this statement, adopted by the Second Continental Congress on the 4th of July just shy of 243 years ago. And while there’s no doubt that this statement represented a radical articulation of human rights and dignity, many people have spent the last 243 years trying to make sense of it. This has, over and over again, meant troubling ourselves over what precisely the initial authors meant by “all men.”

Some argue that their intent was rather restrictive: that “men” meant “men”: as in not women, girls, or boys, but exclusively adults of the male variety. And moreover, if the constitution and early history of our republic further illuminates the meaning of these words, that they probably didn’t really even mean “all” in the sense we might think, but specifically, and exclusively, white, European, Protestant men of a certain level of wealth and standing. But others argue that Jefferson and his compatriots meant “all men” as a euphemism for “humanity” – “men” being a suitable, universalizing stand in for all people at that time, as it technically remains in English today. This is an argument that Elizabeth Cady Stanton made in advocating for women’s rights and suffrage; it is an argument Abraham Lincoln made when advocating for the abolition of slavery; it is an argument the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King made when advocating for Civil Rights; and, in our own time, it is an argument made by many advocating for the rights of immigrants, non-Christians, and, particularly resonant in this Pride month, those identifying as LGBTQ.
Whatever the authors meant by “all men,” it has certainly been the impulse throughout history to understand the words ever more expansively, and to allow that understanding to inform and change our laws, our culture, and even our sense of identity. And yet it seems that at each juncture in history, we tend to look back on past experiences of widening inclusion with pride and righteousness, as though movement in those directions was inevitable. Thank goodness we include women in “all men.” How could anyone have thought it was OK not to? Thank goodness we include African Americans in “all men.” How could the authors of The Declaration of Independence go on to craft a Constitution wherein enslaved blacks were only counted for three-fifths the number of white citizens in the census? How could they not have seen that hypocrisy? Thank goodness we include Muslims and Jews and Hindus and Buddhists and agnostics and Spiritual But Not Religious folks in “all men.” How could we – a country that prides itself on the separation of Church and State – have ever done otherwise?

But we humans – independent of personality and preference - tend to experience further efforts toward expansion and inclusion with some alarm and unease. If look backward with confidence, we look forward with trepidation. For example, many abolitionists who genuinely sought the end of slavery nevertheless resisted the full legal equality of people of color. Many people who genuinely supported women getting the vote could not stomach the Equal Rights Amendment. Many people who celebrate marriage equality and safer, more inclusive places of work, leisure, and worship for those identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer, really don’t know what to make of the trans community and the language of gender non-binary persons.

If Americans have wrestled with inclusion in terms of the meaning of “all men,” then the Christian community has been equally agitated by the powerful, prophetic words of the apostle Paul to the early Christian community of Galatia which we heard this morning: “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.” Woah. If Jefferson and the other founding fathers left some room for interpretation, Paul seems pretty explicit, and it’s hard to imagine a more compelling case for the wildly inclusive Church. Here Paul names three different aspects of identity, as powerful and formative and limiting and life-giving today as they were then - ethnicity, class, and gender - and tells the earliest followers of Jesus that these things not only aren’t as important as their commitment to Christ – their trust in and love of Christ – but they actually cease to exist in any meaningful way. These other aspects of identity pale in comparison to their new and shared
identity as God’s children. That is at the heart of who they are. Their identity is henceforth and forevermore firm, set, stable, glorious in Christ.

And why do you think Paul called out these three – “Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female?” Because they were sources of conflict and division in Galatia! They were the lines across which people were actively separating themselves. Unbalanced, exploitative relations oriented around ethnicity, power, and gender were compromising their promised oneness in Christ. He calls these things out because these are the things that undermined the life of the Church. Paul’s letter to the Galatians is his earliest, and perhaps the earliest text in the New Testament, so the theology it expresses have been with us pretty near since the beginning. Unfortunately, that also means the divisions in the Church he addresses have also been with us for a long, long time. And that’s what made Paul so visionary. So threatening. So inspiring. Because he sees people stuck in inherited and limiting norms, he sees people not even noticing the ways they hurt one another or diminish the opportunities of their neighbors, he sees families and societies absolutely structured around broken relationships, and he says enough. He says that God’s dream for us is different. Is infinitely richer and more robust. He says that we – we – can be different, and indeed are already, if we but live into the fullness of our identity as God’s beloved.

It is a daunting and unsettling invitation, whether it first fills you with excitement or with fear. But Paul knew this. Paul knew all about the alarming nature of change. After all, when the Christian community first came on the scene, he was among its most ardent, impassioned, violent opponents. He did not want his Judaism to expand to include this new movement. He did not want his community to change. And so he persecuted the believers. He had them arrested. He attacked them. Until Jesus himself laid him low, humbling him for a time and calling him into a new life: a life in which he would consistently challenge that very same tendency in others.

I often say it’s sort of ironic that Paul has gained a reputation, particularly among the evangelical community, for retrograde social values, like the subjugation of women or the “sin of homosexuality,” when he was in his own time the most impatient innovator, the most in your face advocate for change. Think about his tendency to bring Greeks to a Jewish dinner table, otherwise uninvited, as his guest. Greeks – considered unclean, dirty, carriers of social if not viral contagion, forcing the issue that this person – yes, this Greek, but this person – is just that: a person. Imagine your nephew showing up to Sunday night dinner with a prostitute; your
daughter bringing home a felon; your husband going in to business with someone like the guy Jesus liberated from all those demons in today’s Gospel. It may be that Paul didn’t intend his words to be quite so radical, but just as we have understood the Declaration of Independence’s “all men” ever more expansively, many Christians today gladly expand on Paul’s statement that “there is no longer Jew or Greek … slave or free … male and female” to mean that, also, there is no longer gay or straight, black or white, citizen or alien, cis or trans, rich or poor. That all of these smaller ways of defining a self fall away as we put on Christ and live into our truest nature, which inevitably draws us into deeper union, fuller relationship, with God and neighbor.

Maybe this sounds wonderful. Maybe this sounds awful. The truth is, I think it is an unsettling claim for all of us – myself included. Because what Paul is saying is also that the things I love about my identity, the things I don’t really want to let go of, the things I deeply value and take pride in and think make me special (even if I’d rather not admit it), will fall away as I grow in faith. I’ll have to learn to let go, or suffer the inevitable loss anyway. And worse, far worse, whatever “they” on the horizon unsettles me – seems beyond the pale of God’s invitation – is probably precisely the one toward whom Paul would have challenged me to draw nearer; the one he would have brought to my dinner table.

Change is complicated, because we’re complicated. A recent episode of the prime time drama *Grey’s Anatomy* offered a surprisingly sensitive lens on this. A subset of the Seattle-based crew of doctors are treating a patient in the ER who presents as a bit of a rocker. Short blonde hair. A strong but pleasant voice. Bright eyes. Pretty features. When an older African-American doctor comes by to do an assessment, he ascribes the pronoun “her” to the patient, who quickly corrects him saying their pronouns are “they / them / their.” He looks confused and waits a bit too long to respond, at which point the two younger doctors also on the case – one a biracial man and the other a lesbian – both jump to reassure the patient, “No problem. Understood. Thank you for letting us know your preferences.” A little later in a lab the older doctor once again calls the patient “she” in the presence of his two peers, who quickly correct him and express their surprise that he is so flustered by this. He expresses annoyance – “do we really have to call her “they” even when she is not around?” To which they respond, subbing in the appropriate plural pronouns, that, yes, they do.

As the show continues, we eventually hear the senior doctor reflect on his resistance. He recalls for the other doctors how hard it was for him as the only black doctor in his class decades
earlier. How much discrimination and out and out abuse he’d received. How alone he’d felt. And he acknowledged that this non-binary language is new and unfamiliar to him. But recalling his own experience of isolation and discrimination, he assured his younger peers that he would put some conscious effort into his language. He would get there, though he didn’t seem at all eager, or sure he wanted to.

“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 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.” It might not seem, at first, like good news, this opening and letting go, this growing and reflecting, this willingness to see things anew. But the promise of our faith is the same as it was all those generations ago: that as we live into our oneness in Christ Jesus, we will see possible friends, allies, buddies, colleagues, co-conspirators, mentors, siblings, partners, in places we never would have thought to look. In people we might otherwise never have seen. Maybe even in parts of ourselves as yet unexplored. Let it be so. Amen.