

Third Sunday after Pentecost
Galatians 5:1, 13-25 | Luke 9:51-62
June 23rd, 2019
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For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

We are now in the season we call "Ordinary" time. That's a reference to numbers, "ordinals." The Latin root means "relating to order in a series," as in the "Third Sunday after Pentecost." And we will be in the season of Ordinary time through the 23rd Sunday after Pentecost.

Ordinary also refers to the everyday, the commonplace, as in all things are "in order." And while that isn't the meaning the church intends, there is a sensible fit as we move out of the mystical season of Pascha and the poetry of Trinity Sunday into the practical day-to-day life of work and home, families and relationships.

"Ordinary time" is the season for allowing the mystery and poetry we have absorbed to influence the way we behave in the world. As we shift our attention between the Absolute and the Relative, we start to recognize that these are different, not separate, realities. We discover that neither is "more true" than the other anymore than inhaling is "more true" than exhaling.

Spiritually, we breathe out what we have breathed in.

Our readings from Luke and Galatians offer insights into that dynamic. Luke's Jesus is walking toward his pending execution in Jerusalem and James and John bar-Zebedee are with him. In the passage just before our

reading, Jesus has gently corrected the brothers for taking some misguided initiative. After a series of missteps and misunderstandings, John told Jesus about trying to prevent someone exorcising demons because the man wasn't following Jesus with them. Jesus calmly but firmly redirected John, saying: "Do not prevent him, for whoever is not against you is for you."

A few days pass and, in the reading that we just heard, a Samaritan village has turned Jesus away because he is headed for Jerusalem. As soon as James and John hear that the village has chosen not to receive Jesus and his followers, the two hot-headed brothers ask Jesus, "...do you wish that we should command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"

Apparently, the Zebedee boys haven't learned a lot. The first impulse, the desire they give in to, is to call down fire to destroy an entire community. To burn them all – men, women and children, their livestock and their homes. Everyone and everything with no mercy.

If this doesn't remind you a little of the day-to-day world we are living in, you might want to pick up a newspaper or listen to the news on your way home. While our 21st c. reality here in the Northwest corner of the U.S. is substantially less dramatic, we are besieged by the relentless dehumanizing of people around the country and beyond.

We wade through the sludge of politicians belittling each other and the swamps of social media dedicated to demonizing one group of people or another. We are pummeled by persistent fearmongering and finger-pointing focused on building boundaries between who's in and who's out.

And it's easy, isn't it, to scold James and John? Jesus did. After all, they were disciples who had been with Jesus from the earliest days and they have seen so much. And yet, they appear to have missed the point of Jesus' character and mission altogether.

To be fair, without excusing *all* their responsibility, the 1st c. Middle Eastern Zebedee brothers didn't have the same antidotes to excessive tribalism that we have now. And every one of us has that same capacity, that same desire within us, to consider bringing fire down on the heads of those who aren't proper members of our clan or who won't receive our way of being or thinking. Even now, followers of Christ can act as though anyone who is different is less than human.

What's more sobering still is that we have an even greater responsibility than the Zebedee boys. Because we know something that they didn't. We know something about heavenly fire.

In fact, when Jesus rebuked John and James, I like to imagine him thinking something like: "Oh, don't worry, boys. Trust me, there's a fire coming. And you will be amazed at what it burns away."

We are gathered together on the third Sunday after the feast that celebrates the Holy Fire of Pentecost; the fire that still burns and consumes people. Not with death, but with love!

It burns away, not people, but animosity and harmful boundaries between people. It burns away, not livestock that feeds families, but indifference that feeds evil. The fire of the Holy Spirit burns away, not houses, but illusions of separation until we wake up to God's presence making a home in our hearts.

Why?

"For freedom," Paul wrote, "for *freedom* Christ has set us free."

Now, to be free does not mean to be entirely without relationships, completely disconnected and utterly independent. Freedom is a feature of all life-affirming relationships that are shaped by the love of God. And because that love is mutual, Paul further insists on equality – *interdependence* – not one-sided self-sacrifice in human relationships.

Paul's lists contrasting the "desires of the flesh" with "the fruit of the Spirit" are not inventories of behaviors that will either destroy or earn God's love. They are about relationships.

Paul's warning about the flesh is not that the material world, including our physical bodies, is evil. His concern is that, being human, our desires are often disordered, misguided. Paul is distinguishing between a God-centered life and a self-centered life.

Christ has set us free for the freedom of holiness shaped by love of God and neighbor, guided by the Holy Spirit.

The sincere desire to enjoy God's creation is liberating. That's not the same as the selfish desire to pile up money for ourselves. The God-given joy in physical intimacy with another person can deliver us from loneliness into wholesome solitude. Racking up a series of meaningless sexual experiences can make us self-absorbed.

Finding delight in good food and wine can increase our gratitude and awe for God's creation. Over-indulgence can bind us to our appetites. Our emotional life is a God-given source of information that helps us navigate relationships. Uncontrolled or misdirected jealousy, wrath or pride can lead us to damage relationships by defining people as undeserving of God's love, misusing our emotional energy to dominate other people or enflaming fear and divisiveness.

Our freedom in Christ, do you see, is not *caused* by our good behavior; our behavior is the result. As it happens, the fire of the Holy Spirit inspires us to be more available and understandable to each other; reconnects us so that we can listen more attentively and see more fully, freeing us to truly care for each other.

And our freedom in Christ is also not *withdrawn* by our misbehavior. Not by God anyway. And I am so very grateful for that because if we were playing "Bad Behavior Bingo" with Paul's list, let's just say that I have been in scoring position more than once in my life.

Look, we all occasionally fall asleep to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. God knows that every once and awhile, we will act up like John and James. And yet Christ frees us *anyway* and the Holy Spirit seeks sanctuary in our love and care for each other *even though* we make a hash of it from time to time.

Christ is the cause of our freedom, the source of the fruit that binds us through our inevitable conflicts, inconsistencies and carelessness. The more we practice turning away from the idols, distractions and disorderly desires that derail God's yearning for our lives, the more God's Holy Spirit can liberate us, free us, for freedom in the new life of God's in-breaking heavenly realm.

For Paul, an ordered life, a life, that is, lived in spiritually "ordinary" time, is neither the rejection of desire nor the surrender to all desires that arise. Instead, it is noticing our desires and choosing to live into those made possible by the Holy Spirit.

God's Holy Spirit generates one singular fruit: Love. God's love is not one virtue or ideal among others. God's love is the headwaters of all the graces that flow into God's creation.

If we consent for God to take up residence in our hearts and in our lives, the Holy Spirit will guide our actions and shape our character to make us more authentically human, more whole. Our creative participation with God's love

within us and among us allows God to reveal more light and more love to the people around us.

They will taste the fruit of the Spirit of love as God uses our lives to spread joy and peace and patience; kindness and generosity; faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

That's how the fire that comes from heaven will free entire communities. In God's own time, the fire of the Holy Spirit will enlighten all people, their livelihoods and their homes. Everyone and everything will be filled to overflowing with mercy and justice; forgiveness and truth. That's what it is to live life in the Spirit and aligned with the Spirit; to live a life given order by the Holy Spirit.

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