

Living with Yourself
Galatians 5: 16-26
Living the Vision: Pathways of Peace

He was upset! He was pretty mad actually. Somebody was stirring things up and getting people anxious and nervous – activating their fear. The believers were beginning to doubt and complain that their church needed to be more orthodox, to believe the right things in order to be authentic Christians.

Word had just reached the old man. He got so upset that he reached for a pen and a sheet of parchment. He wrote the letter himself, not waiting to dictate it through a scribe, as was his usual practice. But he was old and sick. He could not see very well, so the letters he formed were big. His hand was shaky, but his conviction was firm. In this frame of mind, the apostle Paul wrote to the Christian community in Galatia.

Virtually the first words he wrote were, “I can't believe how fickle you are and how easily you have turned traitor.” Paul never seemed to have trouble saying just what he was thinking. He continued, “You crazy Galatians! Did someone put a hex on you? Have you taken leave of your senses? Something crazy has happened? Are you going to continue this craziness?”

In between the rants, it became clear that Paul talking about the big issue of his day: whether Gentiles who become Christians first had to become Jews by following the kosher laws, and by the men getting circumcised. This was really a divisive issue.

What are the most divisive issues among Christians today? (congregation share) Is it support for the war? Is it global warming? What about abortion or gay marriage? Is it the question of whether everyone is saved or just Christians? Well, the matter of whether or not Gentiles had to first become Jewish in order to be Christian was just that big in the first century.

The Galatians were getting caught up in that stuff and Paul was angry. This was distracting them. They were losing focus in their faith.

Christianity was a hard thing to get the mind around in the first century. The same can be said of today too. It's not a religion of clear requirements, especially “thou shalt not's.” At its heart, Christianity is an all-encompassing faith flowing from a transformed spirit. It was, and is, guided by the teachings of Jesus from the Gospels, new commandments such as, “love one another.” They kept the ten commandments while letting go of the strict requirements of Jewish ritual law, etc. Christians find guidance in their individual and collective experience of the Spirit as well. Above all, they believed that God was free and not controlled by either the Jews or the Romans.

God's freedom was revealed in Jesus. There are no rules to follow in order to please God. There is an internal transformation of our lives that lets us see God in each other and in ourselves as a result. Christians are called to live lives of freedom, grace, and love. We are given the task to share this good news with others and not to burden them with rules and dense theologies. We have the privilege to celebrate with them God whose own existence is a dance of joy. This utterly free God dances in through people.

Christian now, as in the first century, have a mission to invite all people to the dance. It's hard to dance without relating to your partners, without seeing each other and responding to each other. The impetus for charity and for justice comes as we see our partners in the dance. Some are being crushed by poverty, disease, hunger, or discrimination. This brokenness prevents them from joining the dance. So, we reach out, touch, and help them be able to dance with us and with God. Very often, they touch us and enable us to dance with them and with God.

Somebody was not dancing in Galatia. Someone was standing on the sidelines criticizing and telling everyone that dancing was wrong. A small group was trying to tell the others how to act and what rules to follow.

In the heat of passion, Paul tried a tactic used by many early Christian teachers. He attempted an argument of reason – the type of argument Greek and Roman philosophers used. He tried to convince the Galatians that it made such good sense to follow Jesus Paul's way.

Christ has set us free to live a free life. I am emphatic about this. The moment any one of you submits to circumcision or any other rule-keeping system, at that same moment Christ's hard-won gift of freedom is squandered.

Everything we know about God's Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself. (*The Message* translation)

Then, in today's passage:

Live freely, animated and motivated by God's Spirit. Then you won't feed the compulsions of selfishness. For there is a root of sinful self-interest in us that is at odds with a free spirit, just as the free spirit is incompatible with selfishness. (*The Message*)

There is a clear division in Greek thought between physical and spiritual -- evil and good. Now these *works of the flesh*, bad stuff, are obvious. Everybody knows these things are bad. They make a colorful list in the Message translation – a seem to have a clearer connection to our own time. The works of the flesh include:

- repetitive, loveless, cheap sex
- a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage
- frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness
- trinket gods
- magic-show religion
- paranoid loneliness
- cutthroat competition
- all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants
- a brutal temper
- an impotence to love or be loved
- divided homes and divided lives
- small-minded and lopsided pursuits
- the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival
- uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions
- ugly parodies of community

Living this way and doing this stuff is just not God's way. It does not reflect people who are led by the Spirit. In contrast, there is the fruit of the Spirit (not works of the Spirit). Fruit is a symptom of a plant. It reveals the nature and health of the plant. The kind and quality of the fruit we bear with our lives is a barometer of our health and identity. It reflects the job we do in cultivating our lives and probably reveals a lot more things about us, too. The fruit of our living is a natural result of living in the Spirit.

The fruit of the Spirit is: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” Signs of the Spirit’s presence are not seen in following a list of *can’t do’s* and *have to believe’s*.

[God] brings gifts into our lives the same way fruit appears in an orchard; things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity, a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. (*The Message*)

Paul concludes that: “since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives.” (*The Message*) There are no marginal children in the family of God. “We have far more interesting things to do with our lives. Each of us is an original.” (*The Message*)

The large vision for our lives as people of the Spirit is *Shalom*, the biblical concept of peace, holistic living, and wholeness in our lives and relationships. It is the vision of living connected with each other and with God. With *Shalom*, we acknowledge that everyone is part of this kingdom, this family. We are individuals, yet we are all together and everyone is in!

The large vision of *Shalom* is God’s vision revealed in creation. It is the vision that guided Jesus’ teaching and also his path to the cross. The focus of this Lenten sermon series is how to live this vision -- “not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives”

First, we need to be open to the new thing God is doing in the world and in our lives. We need to be on a journey. This journey requires that we leave home, maybe not geographically, but certainly spiritually. It requires that we be open to some risk and that we trust the Spirit who is making a new creation in and through our lives. There will be some pain and some struggle because there is new life being born.

Second, it is through living with others in community in a practical and nitty-gritty way that we give shape to the vision of *Shalom*. This vision is built in communities and in relationships where we are God and Christ to each other, me to you and you to me. In our communities, we find ways to live together, cry together – support and challenge each other -- grow together and in God.

Third, today’s focus is on living with yourself – me living with myself. That’s hard and challenging work. We seek to live in the Spirit, resisting all forms of legalism and fundamentalism. We seek to live in the Spirit, trusting, worshiping, and serving God who is free – who is not co-opted by any national government or political system. God is not a capitalist nor a communist – not the property of Christians, Moslems, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, or anyone. Jesus has shone us that we are free and, in that freedom, we are able to see embrace God in each other.

The challenge we face is to cultivate the interior and exterior life of the Spirit, to find the right balance for ourselves of possessions, politics, ministry, and Sabbath. We’ll know we are finding that balance when the fruit of our living looks, smells, and tastes like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Don't shortchange yourself. You are called to live, really live, before you die, not just wait for eternity to embrace the promises of God. Now is the time to live in the fullness of the Spirit. Now is the time to follow Jesus.

You are unique and so am I. The universe needs you and me to be fully ourselves. We are called to profess Christ, to make following Jesus by living in the Spirit our profession. We are called to work at cultivating lives that bear the fruit of Spirit.

May the God who dances in creation
Who embraces us with human love
Who shakes our lives like thunder
Bless us
And drive us out with power
To fill the world with her justice. Amen.
(Janet Morley)