

Luke 9:51-62
St. Andrew's, Nogales

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“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” In his letter to the people of Galatia in central Asia Minor the Apostle Paul claims that the Gospel has indeed set us free, while at the same time reminding us that how we live our lives and what we do reveal to others that very freedom Christ gives us. His letter also does a good job of summing up what made Christianity a separate world religion rather than one of many Jewish sects.

Christianity was just beginning its rapid spread through the known Mediterranean world as Christians were beginning to break through many of the rules by which local cultures organized themselves, and bringing new freedoms to people. The challenge facing these early Christians outside the Hebrew speaking Holy Land was how to meld people from so many different languages, cultures, and social strata into a cohesive community, because no single group's rules, mores or standards would work for everyone and in every situation.

Paul was seeking to find ways for how people might treat each other in this situation and form Christian communities living together in a way Jesus taught his disciples. Instead of recommending the adoption of a specific set of rules to live by, Paul suggests an approach to life and to each other that would help these early converts journey through changing circumstances.

So in this letter to the Galatians, Paul contrasts what he calls living by the flesh with living by the spirit. And Paul proceeds to list the kinds of qualities, which show up in the life of the spirit verses what he calls the works of the flesh.

Paul points out that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

And he contrasts the fruit of the Spirit with the works of the flesh. “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.”

Mark Douglas, a Professor of Christian Ethics, points out, “We ought to resist any too-simple opposition between the material and the spiritual. The works of the flesh include both material desires (such as fornication and drunkenness) and spiritual ones (idolatry and sorcery, for example); the fruit of the Spirit enriches not only our spiritual lives but our relationships with the stuff of the world.”

He adds that ‘Paul’s problem with the flesh is not that it desires, but that its desires are disordered; it wants the wrong things or wants good things in the wrong way – usually too much or too little. Wanting sexual intimacy, it pursues fornication; wanting contact with the divine, it pursues idols; wanting joy, it carouses.’”

If we don't live our lives dependent on God then we will definitely seek another kind of dependency. Perhaps our dependencies are so much less spectacular than the ones on Paul's

list we don't even recognize them. Reading too much escapist literature, watching too much TV, or for the younger generation it may be texting or listening to I pods constantly. Can you think of other kinds of dependencies or works of the flesh, which Paul might not have listed in his day?

Now living with the fruits of the spirit is not all peace and harmony. Paul's list of fruits of the Spirit does not rule out things like disagreement and conflict. Conflict is part of risking of oneself in community and dealing with it, with respect for each other, can help us grow as individuals and as a community. Conflict is something that Episcopalians are often prone to avoiding. We must face conflict when it arises by calling on the fruits of the spirit, which we share.

And, William Harkins of the Cathedral of St. Philip in Atlanta warns us, we must 'beware of practicing our faith with a zeal which gives rise to anger, malice, divisiveness, and other ills to which the flesh is heir.'" This is a caution that Episcopalians are less likely to need, don't you think? We need to be more zealous in speaking of our faith and inviting others into our Christian community.

Here are a few other cautions: People can misuse their freedom and seek to dominate others. And conversely, people who love and serve others may not value themselves as beloved children of God and be taken advantage of and abused.

In his letter Paul reminds the people of Galatia that everything is summed up in a single commandment that Jesus gave his disciples, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

As we ourselves discern what God has done in our lives we can share that with others what Christ has done for us, and that in turn can affect the way we love our neighbors. To complete the circle we will find that loving our neighbors helps us see what God has done. I see the interactions not like a circle but much more like a spiral upward.

We've all heard the saying "It takes a village to raise a child." But I think it is also true to say "It takes a Christian community to raise a mature Christian adult, someone who can handle freedom responsibly." It takes all of us in Christian community to hold each other accountable for mature, adult behavior, the kind of behavior Paul calls us to, those ways of approaching life which are the gifts of living in the spirit.

As we move forward here at St. Andrew's let us remember that we face many of the same challenges the ancient Christians faced. For example, how to spread the good news of Jesus in a multicultural community and one where more and more people were not brought up in the Christian faith. So let us learn from those early Christian communities and the teaching of apostles like Paul. How will the way we treat each other speak to those we invite into community with us? How will our actions declare others, just as theirs did, that we are followers of Christ and children of God?

As we come to the table this morning let us give thanks for God's Holy Spirit and its gifts to us.

Amen.