

*For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters.
Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.
For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."
But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.
But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.
For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit against the flesh,
for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.
But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident:
sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger,
rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies and things like these.
I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.
But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control;
against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh
with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.
Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.*

Galatians 5:13-26

"If We Live by the Spirit, Let Us Hold to the Spirit..."

This morning, Paul leads us into the home stretch of his message to those Christian disciples who were from faraway, not Jews from old Israel but Romans, Greeks and Celts who lived along the highways and byways of western Asia, the trade routes which ran from Syria in the east and led to the Aegean Sea where eastern and oriental goods and travelers boarded ship and sailed for Greece and Italy and parts beyond, where the sun eventually set over the horizon and into the Atlantic Ocean which seemed like the edge of the world when the Christian gospel began to head in that direction under the leadership of Paul the Apostle.

And Paul's gospel had not only traveled faraway, but the pioneer apostle, whom Jesus had knocked off his feet back in Syria and to whom Jesus had custom taught a gospel in a series of visions in the eastern deserts, Paul, the evangelist had gone west, bringing with him a gospel that would put men and women from faraway, people like you and me, on a different footing with God than anyone in the ancient world had ever known before. In the east, in the Promised Land, Jesus' gospel had simply interwoven with all the ancient rituals and customs first taught by Moses and handed down the generations all the way to Jesus and his disciples.

And not just Jews, but pagans all over the ancient world had framed their religion with similar rituals, serenading each other in long parades up to hilltop temples, a journey that culminated in an animal sacrifice and other rituals, followed by some mysterious consultation with an ancient priest or priestess or sage. But only Israel's religion was founded on truth. "*Salvation is from the Jews!*" Jesus had said to the Samaritan woman. The God Moses met on Mt Sinai had interwoven Moses' law with ethics and principles and ideals that were holy, counter-intuitive, different from how most ancient souls imagined life should be lived.

But pagan religion outside Israel was instinctual, founded on peoples' desires and appetites, based on feelings and ideals that satisfied what people wanted and craved and hoped for in life. So pagan worship outside Israel incorporated the same building blocks, the same "*elemental principles of the world,*" Paul called them, as Israel's religion. The ceremony and sacrifices, the feasts and festivals were similar everywhere, but in Israel the ethics and morals, the respect for peoples' rights and for family obligations, and most important, the recognition that the true God is holy, different, purer, wiser, kinder, better than us.

It was a burden old Israel found impossible to bear. Years after Paul wrote this letter, in Acts 15, there would be a confrontation in Jerusalem between the Judean disciples of Jesus, most of whom continued to keep Moses' law and Paul, who had taught disciples from faraway, people like us, that all the symbols and customs and rituals of the law had found fulfillment in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. So it was enough, Paul taught, to simply give one's life to Jesus, and to walk in the Spirit, and to love one another in the congregations where God placed us, and in the communities God sent us to serve.

The sternest and strictest of the kosher disciples in Jerusalem fairly growled at Paul when he tried to tell them as much in the congregation. Until Peter, who had tangled with Paul about this himself, stood up in Paul's defense and said to them all, "*Now...why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the faraway disciples that neither we nor our fathers could bear? For we believe that we will be saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus just as they will!*" In other words, for all their kosher piety, the Judean disciples had known they needed a Savior, had given their lives to Jesus. Moses had pointed the way to Jesus, but only Jesus could fulfill the law and bring us cleansed and whole in the care and company of his Father. So it was a kind of unwarranted slavery to impose kosher custom and ritual on people Jesus had already made holy and clean.

So Paul writes to us this morning, "...you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters. Only don't use freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another." Paul's concern, on the one hand, is that Greeks and Romans and Celts don't become enslaved to a religious program that adds nothing to the faith they've already expressed in Christ. And on the other hand that they don't mistake the "freedom" Christ provides as an "opportunity" to live out the wants and needs and impulses of their own "flesh." Their old pagan religions had been about doing what comes naturally, following their own wants and needs and thoughts.

In the gospels, Jesus had taught that the two overarching commandments of the old law entailed "love," love for God heart, soul, mind, and strength, and then Jesus had echoed Moses, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." And here in his letter, Paul echoes them both, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The point being that Christ hasn't freed us to be our instinctive, natural selves, he's freed us to go reach up high, where God lives and to find those qualities that God wants give us, the first being love.

And how does that work? Paul writes, "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desires of the flesh." Now this sounds like a command, but really it's an if-then promise, if we walk by the Spirit, if we believe the Spirit is in us, and pray and attend to our Bibles and live with him and for him, then Paul promises, "...you will not carry out the desires of the flesh." And the point here is not that every physical desire is wrong, not that being physical is our problem. The point is that sin has made us slaves to our own wants and needs and thoughts and moods. They live part and parcel in our flesh and to be free we must govern them.

Paul put it this way, he wrote: "...the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit against the flesh, for these are opposed to each another, to keep you from doing the things you want to do." In other words, it's a battle! We came to Christ because we were tired of sin, tired of self, tired of hurting others, tired of being hurt. But so much of what we're tired of actually lives inside us, in our flesh. And when we throw in with Christ, his Spirit comes to live in our hearts and we have a choice to make. Will we follow the Spirit toward God and Christ and Bible and Church? Or will we stay comfortable, seek happiness, success, pleasure, excitement somewhere far from Christ, in our own space on our own terms.

Paul confronts us with a formidable list of what he calls "the works of the flesh...promiscuity, impurity, sensuality." For his Roman, Greek and Celtic readers, the list amounts to a tour of their pagan past. Pagan worship was notoriously sexual and orgiastic. So he goes on, "idolatry, sorcery." The Greek word for sorcery is pharmakeia and implies substance abuse. He moves next into the interpersonal realm, "enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, and then back to pagan excesses, "orgies." It's a graphic list written for people who had lived graphic lives.

And Paul warns that: "...those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." Calvin observes that all of us will get caught expressing some work of the flesh on our way through life, but the point of Paul's acknowledging evil in such graphic detail is give disciples a moral compass with enough details that if our flesh draws us wrong we can name what we've done, call it sin, and get back where the Spirit wants us to live. So Paul writes: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control; against such things there is no law."

Note carefully that it is in the flesh that we work. All that dreary list is called "the works of the flesh" because the flesh will bring us toil and slavery. The Spirit, on the other hand, is associated with promise and grace: "... walk in the Spirit and you will not carry out the desires of the flesh," Paul has already promised us. The point here is not that the Spirit brings us under some heavenly spell that renders us unable to put a foot wrong, rather the promise is that our worship, our reading, our praying, our faithfulness to choose what the Spirit wants brings us beyond the reach of our fleshy habits and impulses over time.

So Paul calls this wonderful list of qualities, fruit, "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control," Paul calls them fruit because they grow on us, they decorate us as we attend to and respond to the Spirit's work in our lives. They are not qualities we can put on or manufacture, they grow in us and among us to the extent we learn to love God and each other.