

Sermon for Proper 8C
Sunday, June 26, 2016
“A different life”

Text: Galatians 5:1, 13-25

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

As I looked through the lectionary readings for this morning, I was moved by the epistle reading. This passage from Galatians is probably one you've heard before in some iteration. Preachers love to tell folks about the dangers of the works of the flesh and the virtues of the fruits of the spirit. But, before we delve into some do's and don'ts, we need to put the epistle lesson into context. Once again the framers of our current lectionary left out some important parts of the text; verses 2-12 are missing, and they're actually important verses, so I'm going to give them to you:

Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law. You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love. You were running well; who prevented you from obeying the truth? Such persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough. I am confident about you in the Lord that you will not think otherwise. But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty. But my friends, why am I still being persecuted if I am still preaching circumcision? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!

Yeah, Paul gets pretty harsh here, because he is so passionate about what he is trying to say. From the time Paul wrote the Letter to the Galatians to the present time, Galatians has been at the center of bad teaching from church leaders. Paul wrote this letter because there were leaders of the

budding Christian community in Galatia who were preaching that something must be added to the cross of Christ for salvation to be truly effective. Get circumcised, keep laws, observe certain customs and rituals and *then* you are really saved in a way you would not be if it were only a matter of trusting in Christ's work alone. In other words, adherence to Jewish law was necessary to salvation in Christ. The food laws of the Torah were required, the communal laws must be followed, and that male circumcision was essential to being a "proper" Christian. But, Paul said, "No." Paul said they were off base from the essential message of Christ: that one love God first and love neighbor as self. They were off base in thinking that something else was necessary for salvation other than Christ's saving work alone. He wrote that they were so off base, that they might as well castrate themselves!

That's where our lectionary reading for today picks back up, and we find Paul talking about vices and values—the do's and don'ts of Christian living—starting first by not being slaves to the law, but rather by sticking to what's essential about the law. You see, the bad preachers were making the law, the Torah, the end in and of itself; the law had essentially become an idol—the law had become like a god, and for Paul, anything that became so important to a person that it replaced love for God and neighbor, anything that would overshadow attention to God was a vice. Paul pointed out that life in Christ was a new life, different from life as they otherwise knew it, not being a slave to the law. And here's Paul's funny twist: life in Christ means having the freedom to be a slave to one another in love—not being given to self-indulgence. But, Paul's message was more than that; Paul's message was that, sure Christ's work of salvation was indeed complete, but Christians must not just rest on their laurels, but get up and do something with that. First, Christians must let go of those things that become idols in our lives—those would be the works of the flesh: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, "and things like these." And then, Christians must take on the fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Hearing Paul's list of do's and don'ts couldn't be more timely and relevant for our present time. In fact, in many ways we live in a society that is very much like the Galatian church. There has been a lot of bad

preaching around what it means to be a Christian to the point where Holy Scripture has been idolized to the point where the words of the Bible have become more important than loving neighbor, self, or even God, for that matter. When Christian leaders preach that the victims of the Orlando shooting “got what they deserved” because it happened in a gay club or protesting funerals, then they have made the Bible the idol, and certainly not showing love for God or for neighbor, because you can’t say you love God and then not love all of his creation. But Orlando isn’t the only example. Look how self-indulgent our society has become. Just this week there was joy over the vote in Great Britain to leave the European Union. Now, I’m not fully knowledgeable of all the political and economic details; I’ve heard credible arguments for and against the decision, but what really bothered me was all the talk of self-preservation. Leaving the union because they are wasting our money and making us open our borders to people we don’t want in our country. Doesn’t *that* sound familiar. That kind of talk doesn’t happen just over there across the pond; it’s happening right here at home in the good old USA.

How much of our society is given over to self-indulgence? It’s all about me. What’s going to benefit me? How can I keep more of my money for myself? What is my constitutional right to own a gun, even though every day I hear of terrible gun violence terrorizing our streets and communities? How can I shut out the voices of people who say things or believe things I don’t agree with? Our national political system is utterly gridlocked by folks who want it their way or no way at all. Our churches are at odds with each other because we’re so focused on the right reading of scripture that we can’t just simply love each other because we share the love of Christ within us. Church folk can’t love each other and interact with each other, because we can’t get over our our egos. Yes, we are living in a time and in a world that is just as off base as the Galatians.

Now, let me tell you something. That list of works of the flesh that Paul gives in Galatians 5 is about extremes. Drinking alcohol isn’t a bad thing, but overdrinking and getting drunk is. Sexual expression between two adults who care about and honor each other isn’t bad, but when sex becomes objectified and the idol, then it’s bad. Desiring things isn’t bad either; we might want a better education or aspire a better job to make life better for ourselves and our families, but when our desire becomes the be all and end all, or if we feel that we deserve better but no one else,

that's the vice that Paul was talking about. Too often the church, many preachers, have used that list to preach against and demonize things and people in a way that is certainly not loving. Anything that we do to such an extreme that we can't show God's love is a work of the flesh.

But we are to take on the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Can you imagine how much better our lives would be if we showed love and peace, patience and kindness to each other? Can you imagine if we practiced self-control with the folks we don't like or agree with? Can you imagine how much better our communities would be if we showed more patience, generosity, gentleness, kindness? It would at least make driving more enjoyable! What if our politicians actually focused on the fruits of the Spirit in their decision making? Hot button issues like immigration reform and gun control might not even be an issue; we wouldn't be arguing over civil rights—it would matter if you were Latino, black, immigrant, gay, transgender, female, physically challenged, mentally challenged. All would be treated equally as children of God, equally worthy of the American Dream. What if our world leaders stopped thinking about themselves and their own country's self interest and modeled for the world's citizens what it means to recognize that we are connected to each other in so many complex ways, and what affects me also affects you? The environment, the economy, mutual respect. What if we lived in a world where we all lived together in love, joy, peace, patience, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?

The Christian life is a different life in which we let go of those things that keep us from loving God and each other. That's what Paul was talking about in his letter to the Galatians. That's what Jesus was talking about in the Gospel lesson. It means living in a way that's different from the way the world thinks we should live. It means letting go of the works of the flesh, of self-indulgence, of self interest, and live in such a way as to show that all of God's children matter and deserve to be loved and respected. We do it and we don't look back, because that's just the way we are as Christians. It's like the tag line in the GEICO commercial: "It's what we do." Let us indulge in one thing; let us indulge in the fruits of the Spirit. Amen.

Resources

“Sermon Starters,” http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-8c/?type=lectionary_epistle

“Commentary on Galatians 5:1, 13-25” in *The Working Preacher*, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2874