

Galatians 5: 1, 13-25 "The Fruit of All Fruits" Rev. Janet Chapman 2/21/21

Some of my most memorable conversations with people over the years have been about love, some have been right on target while others have seriously missed the mark. In the skit Dianne and I shared, Duke has misconstrued the concept of love found in Galatians. As we saw last week, there are a lot of silly notions about love. Myths about love keep people spending their entire lives looking for their own personal holy grail of love, only to be disappointed time and again.

Yet, when the author Paul speaks of love such as in our scripture, he is not talking about romantic or friendship love but on that unconditional and sacred love called agape. It is a word my youngest, Ivy, learned at church camp which prompted her to have it tattooed on her wrist. I'm just grateful it wasn't a picture of the Jonas brothers at the time. Our Galatians text shapes our Lenten journey to Easter this year as Paul writes to the church at Galatia inviting them to embrace true freedom through the practice of love. The Galatians have seriously missed the mark and he aims to put them back on track. For many, coming to understand a love which has no strings attached, no preexisting conditions to disqualify it, is mind-boggling but it is the kind of love God has for us. When I was growing up, the pastor at my church used to close every worship service by saying, "God loves you, I love you, and there is nothing you can do about it!" Some of us still haven't accepted that reality.

William Harkins, pastoral care associate, tells of visiting a dear friend and colleague who underwent a courageous, yearlong battle with leukemia. This colleague had been a priest for 40 years, as well as a wise and gentle mentor to younger priests. After numerous hospitalizations, 2nd & 3rd opinions, 2 extensive rounds of chemo, and a joyful but short-lived

remission, the cancer returned with severe intensity. In consultation with family, Harkins' friend made the tough decision to stop all but palliative care, and die on his own life-giving terms. In one of their last conversations, he said, "I have had so much love." "Yes," replied Harkins, "there are so many who love you and are grateful for you." "That may be," he replied, "but what I mean is that there are so many whom I have loved. I have so much gratitude for the love God has enabled me to give away." They were quiet for a few moments as they sat in the spring sunshine out on his deck. Then he said, "Having made the decision not to continue with treatment has freed me to focus on quality of life rather than longevity. It has given me the freedom to see in a new way how much love there has been, is now, and will be. Love is meant to be given away. That is what the incarnation is all about, of God coming to be in human form." A few days later, he was gone. Harkins' friend helped him to see that bondage takes many forms, and one must be courageous in naming them. For his friend, bondage meant being tied to all the desperate medical treatments he had endured and when he allowed himself to finally separate from that, he was released to experience a deeper, richer dimension of love. He was freed to give his love away in gratitude and without fear. He was able to rest easy in the secure knowledge of resurrection.

In these verses of Galatians, Paul is saying unequivocally that the freedom God provides is meant to inspire and foster love. The harsh debates and infighting among the young Christians in Galatia were a direct result of their ongoing enslavement to the matters of the flesh, circumstances focused on the self. Paul sets up this dichotomy between flesh and Spirit advocating for the Spirit as the path to agape love and fulfillment in life. The problem is that this central contrast between "flesh" and "Spirit" has often been misunderstood. People have

identified “flesh” with “body” as if our bodies as flesh are the primary problem and temptation in life. Given the common meaning of the word “flesh” in English, that is not surprising. It seems to indicate that Paul was “anti-body” and the items he lists as “works of the flesh” only undergird that: impurity, drunkenness, carousing, fornication, all of which can be construed as bodily sins. However, the “works of the flesh” also include things like jealousy, quarrels, factions, enmities, and dissensions. Therefore, we can deduce that when Paul uses the word “flesh,” he isn’t identifying it with our bodies, like it is bad that we are bodily creatures who eat, drink, and have sex. Rather, as biblical scholars Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg note, the “works of the flesh” are defined by a way of life that is in direct contrast to life in the Spirit. “Works of the flesh” are the result of being centered in something other than the Spirit of God as known in Jesus. Life centered in the flesh is life centered in the finite; it is living by the “wisdom of this world,” the normalcy of the domination systems, the acceptance of power systems which propagate strife, anger, enmities, quarrels, dissensions, factions, and envy. I bet we can name some of those systems in our society if we think about it, especially witnessed in the last couple months.

The other way of life, the alternative to life centered in the “flesh,” is life centered in the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. All are fruit of the Spirit which are planted and grow into maturity by God’s grace. This fruit-filled life is the result of a Spirit transplant which occurs with one purpose – to build up relationships and unity in the community of faith and beyond. One scholar compared the workings of the Holy Spirit to moving sidewalks we find in bigger airports these days. Walking sidewalks allow travelers to get around airports a little faster than they would moving on their

own limited and finite power. I love them because they provide support for those who have brought along too much baggage, myself included. They allow folks to move at their own pace while providing an added benefit to those who want to move quicker or who are overcome by the stress of the journey. Travelers still walk to their destination but now do so a bit easier, less burdened, because of the force underneath propelling them forward. The moving sidewalk is a limited analogy, but the idea is that the Holy Spirit makes walking in Christ's path more bearable. The Spirit frees us from the finite and the limited in order to more effectively love, which is the most important destination of any Christian. Alicia Vargas notes Paul intentionally heads up his list of spiritual fruit with love, for it is the ideal which encompasses all the others; it is the mainspring of all other activities.

Thus, dearly beloved, I invite you to step onto that walking sidewalk the Spirit provides as we move from the works of the flesh to the fruit of the Spirit, that fruit of all fruits, agape love. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit, so that we might truly give our love away and our journey from death to life will be complete.