

1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21; Psalm 16;
Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

The comedian George Carlin loves the English language. He has many skits based on this love of his, and about the only one that I can actually talk about here in church has to do with oxymorons – those terms, those figures of speech in which incongruous or contradictory terms are combined. Hot water heater – why do we need to heat hot water? Jumbo shrimp. Plastic silverware. Applicable to me, short sermons. With apologies to the Vicar, military intelligence. Or perhaps today, we could even add business ethics.

Well, Paul, in his letter to the Galatians has put together what seem to be two contradictory thoughts. He starts off by saying that we are "called to freedom", and then just a few verses later, he says "Through love, become slaves to one another." Freedom and slavery.

Paul is writing to the church in Galatia while they are being bombarded by a group of believers who understand the Gospel to mean "God loves you – as long as you do what you are told". Paul responds, No; God loves us regardless of what we do; our lifestyle is unimportant in matters of the faith. That does not, however, give us license to live as we please. **How** we live is not important; however, as a baptized believer, my life does reflect how and what I believe.

So, if I say that I'm a believer and yet never help someone in need, what kind of witness of a God's love does that give? If on my car I have a big old bumper sticker that says "Honk if you love Jesus", and yet weave in and out of traffic, roll through stop signs and roar across intersections just as the lights turn from yellow to red, the honking that I'm going to hear will have nothing to do with the love of Jesus that the other people have (which is also why I don't have a "pastor" sticker on my car).

Paul goes so far as to give us a list of how **not** to live. Now the "works of the flesh," as he says ("sin" in other words), the works of the flesh are obvious – fornication, impurities, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like . . . let me give you a detailed example of each one of them . . . No wait, this isn't HBO. Let's put it this way: all of these that Paul listed, these "works of the flesh", are self-indulgent. They center around and primarily involve me, myself, and I. Paul contrasts those, in verses 22 and 23, by saying the fruit of the spirit ("works of the flesh" verses "fruit of the spirit") is love,

joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And these are ways, not necessarily of the individual, but of the community.

Community is something that we as Americans oftentimes don't deal well with, because we pride ourselves on our independence. "I don't need any help." "I can do it myself, thank you very much." "It's my way or the highway." Our American sense of independence, while on the one hand is a good and strong factor, does tend to fly in the face of the sense of Christian community. And community is what Paul is talking about when he speaks of becoming slaves to one another. We are free from the slavery of the law, of attempting to fulfill all of the religious and social and dietary and even political requirements that had grown to be several hundred by the first century A.D. And Paul should know. He had done his level best to try to fulfill all of those laws, so much so that he purposely persecuted those he felt were trying to bring that law down. Christ freed Paul from the bondage of the law, the law which told us not only how to live, but also explained to us in very easy to understand terms, that we are sinners.

By becoming free from the law, and by being baptized into Christ Jesus, we voluntarily become slaves to one another. Christ calls us to serve one another. Not just by serving a three year term on counsel. Not just by helping to sell the Fair Equity coffee in the Gathering Space. Not just by being an usher or lector or worship assistant. Christ calls us to serve one another by helping those folks with whom we would rather not deal. Christ calls us to service by speaking out against injustice when it happens. Christ calls us to serve one another by proclaiming Christ in how we live every day. For we indeed have been given freedom. We've been given free will, the ability to choose to serve God, or to serve ourselves.

Martin Luther (he lived back in the 1500's, was a theologian, you may have heard of him) wrote about freedom on a deeper level in his 1520 treatise called The Christian Liberty. He wrote what sounded like two opposite sentences: "The Christian is the perfectly free lord of all, subject to none" and "The Christian is the perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all". In other words, the Christian is free **from** sin, death, the power of the devil, because of the unmerited love of God through Christ Jesus' death and resurrection. And the Christian is free **for** the unfettered service to meet the needs of their neighbor in the spirit of thankful joy for the abundant blessings that God gives to us.

Now when we take this lesson from Galatians, and especially look at our first and Gospel lessons this morning, we come to understand that being a believer is not a part time affair; it takes our whole being. Elisha left everything to follow Elijah. The twelve left behind their livelihoods. A couple of other people in our Gospel lesson this morning wanted to "o a few other things Lord, before I come and follow you."

A few months ago, on a website called Zembla, Sean Keane wrote a piece entitled "My Relationship with Jesus is Strictly Business". He says, "You hear a lot about people trying to work on their spirituality, to get in touch with their God. Some people seem to

want to be as close as possible with the Lord. Not me. My relationship with Jesus Christ is strictly business. He is my carpenter. Handled the addition we put on the master bedroom. Works fast, is polite to the kids, doesn't work on weekends. Technically, he's a carpenter/messiah because of the dying for my sins thing. Saying 'my sins' is kind of weird; it's the accumulated sins of all humanity, not just my stuff. I'm not ungrateful, but I also don't want to get that thrown back in my face all the time. The last thing I need is him trying to guilt me into bringing him lemonade when he's out on the roof. And if it gets too personal with your savior, things can get weird. Out of nowhere, Jesus will start dropping hints about maybe going bowling, getting a bite to eat after church. Next thing you know he's just 'dropping in' every Saturday afternoon and inviting me to join his softball team or go with him to wash the lepers. No thanks. Don't get me wrong, Jesus is a nice guy. We just don't have that kind of a relationship." (March 14, 2003, Zembla Web Site, Zembla.cementhorizon.com.)

We are called to have a deeper relationship. Not just to come on Sunday morning, and forget about God the rest of the week. We are called to live out and be examples of the fruit of the spirit.

One last example of the difference between selfish motives and freedom. A few months ago there was a movie "Bruce Almighty". In it, things are not going Bruce's way, and he complains to God. To his surprise, God answers him - in person! Not only that, God gives Bruce all the divine abilities to change life, and answer prayer. At first, Bruce was having some fun with this. He did a little bit of revenge on those people that he thought deserved it. He did a little bit of "physical enhancement" to the woman he cares about. But he's playing with all of these new-found powers, when he realizes that he's focusing on himself. He's got these vast powers, and he's pretty much ignoring everyone but himself. But he struggles with the problem of the woman he cares for, who isn't quite caring for him the same way, and so at one point when God checks in with Bruce, Bruce asks him, "How do I make someone love me without violating their free will?" And in the movie, God responds, "Welcome to my world. When you figure that one out, let me know."

Bruce was given the power to do whatever. He focused on himself. He didn't want the false love of this woman that he cared for, just as God doesn't want our false love, our false service, our false works, either. Paul reminds us that we are called to live by the Spirit, for, in verse 25, "If we live by the Spirit, let us be guided by the Spirit." We are called to hear the voice of the Spirit. And once called, once we hear the voice of the Spirit, then in freedom, we are to act on it.
Amen.

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