

“Sharing our Fruits”

It all comes down to love. Those were my parting words at the end of a discussion over breakfast about raising children. My friend, with whom I was sharing this breakfast, shared the difficulties of raising teenagers and young adult children. She described the difficulty of working with her children’s’ growing sense of independence and her desire as a mother to help them think through some of their decisions. She shared the universal question of “are they listening?”

I know with my own daughter’s growing up that parenting requires a lot of listening. But now that she is a young adult and making decisions about her life, I come to this period of being a parent with one hope and that is that I hope she knows she is loved. And as she experiences more and more freedom in her life that she chooses love as she builds her community and serves her community. So, my parting words to my friend – it all comes down to love – is what I hope for my daughter’s life. The love that God shares with us first and is a fruit of the Spirit.

Now Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, was writing to those in Galatia to whom he had ministered. He found that after he left there were preachers that followed him that were preaching another message to the Galatians. They were instructing the Gentiles in Galatia that in order to become followers of Christ that they must adhere to Jewish law and become circumcised.

Paul on the other hand was writing to say to these Gentiles in Galatia that in order to be followers of Christ, they do not have to follow the laws of the flesh. It is the fruits of the Spirit that allows for the freedom in Christian living.

In the translations between different languages in which the bible has been written, it is important to note that “the flesh” used in today’s translation has also been translated as “self-indulgence.” Both are used in Paul’s letter that we read. So, for the sake of clarity, I would like to focus on the word self-indulgence. In some ways this helps the text make sense. If we are being asked at the beginning of the text to use this God-given freedom not as an “opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another,” it becomes clearer that we are being asked not to just love ourselves but to love our neighbor as

ourselves" thus creating a sense of freedom to love that is not self-indulgent but a love for all of God's beloved.

When we are caught up in self-indulgence, we direct our needs and desires inward. When we are caught up in self-indulgence and we seek being in contact with the divine, we seek out idols or false Gods, to use biblical language, to fill our spiritual needs. It is in this idolatry that keeps us from being filled by God's spirit.

As one commentator put it, the freedom we are called to, when it becomes "disordered desires, we actually become enslaved not to one another but to our own passions and this ultimately destroys community." In ethical terms, our vision of the world and our actions interact with each other in this freedom to be led by the Spirit.

Coming up on the 4th of July, freedom is talked about a lot in our country. In the "Star-Spangled Banner", our national anthem, we sing "O! say does that star-spangled banner yet wave. O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave? We have many freedoms in our country such as the freedom to vote for our leaders, freedom to own land, freedom to move about the country unrestricted and the list goes on.

The freedom that Paul is saying we are called to is freedom from the self-indulgence that draws us only inward and away from God and the Spirit. Self-indulgence takes us away from our neighbors. Have you ever noticed that focusing inward takes a lot of energy? We pull up our drawbridge so that people can't come over to us and we fill our figurative moats with whatever in order to keep others at a distance from us. This type of self-indulgence turns ugly after a while. We become at first protective and then suspicious of others and we fill ourselves with thoughts of scarcity saying there won't be enough of whatever *it is* for me. And then we draw closer into ourselves and more protective.

What if we were free from that worry that comes with self-indulgence and self-protection? What if, instead, we feel free to live by the Spirit and guided by the Spirit? We become freed from fearing whether we have enough material things, things of the flesh that often accompany self-indulgence. If we live by the Spirit and are guided by the Spirit, we receive the fruits of the Spirit. We are free then to share love, joy, peace, patience, and kindness. We live a life full of generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Life these days is busy. I hear it from folks who have children. I hear it from folks working full-time. I hear this from the newly retired who fill their time volunteering or caring for grandchildren. Or we may be social and always on the run from one social engagement to another. We may love our jobs, our children, our grandchildren and our friends. That isn't the issue. It's great that we can and do. It is the busyness that may actually keep us from really being patient or kind or gentle with each other. I am not saying these activities alone are self-indulgent but busyness can keep us from feeling or recognizing the freedom we are given and the fruits of the Spirit that are ours to share.

And in addition to the scurrying around we do, the materials that were created to make our lives freer have only enslaved us more. The invention of the washing machine was going to make women have more free time but as families began to also move away from each other and away from the extended family, many women had more demands on their time. The TV-dinner was going to make it easier for families to be together around the new invention – the TV. The microwave was to help working parents make dinner faster after working all day. Only now many families make those quick meals so that they can run back out the door to another activity.

The computer, cell phones and tablets allow people to work wherever and whenever. These inventions were supposed to make us freer somehow but instead we are busier than ever. With this connectivity, comes the expectation to be more productive.

How much freedom do we have to disconnect from the expectation to always be productive. We feel the need to always answer that email, read that Blog or that Facebook posting, finishing one more project or task. We see openings in our time so we work at one more volunteer job. Some equate the expectations of modern life to a hamster on a wheel. We keep going and going and going but where are we going?

I will raise my hand and say I, too, am guilty of this busyness. My daughter went to college several years ago. At first, I felt like a kid in a candy store with all that free time I found myself having. I continued my day job but I added more social activities and I found myself volunteering more at church. But, in order to sense God or have the space to reflect on where God is in my life, it wasn't something

that happened when I was at a church meeting or when I was sitting in the pew wondering who I could catch after the service to talk about a project.

As I watched my busyness increase, I decided to resume a practice I had enjoyed several years ago. I went on retreat. And it wasn't any retreat. It was in a hermitage in the woods in the dead of winter with no electricity for lights or heat. It was a one room cabin lit and warmed by a gas heater. I literally and figuratively unplugged.

I heard of one person who felt the same way when they took a job in another country and did not know one person or the culture or the language. They wrote of the experience saying, "I was fortunate in being away from all that had been familiar to me, so that the lines of my former life's finitude became hardened and clear." They felt they were freed from the expectations of their former life to realize their need for God as a stranger welcomed her into their home for a meal. It was God's agape that was shared.

It was same with my experience of becoming unplugged or off the hamster wheel of busyness when I was on my retreat that I realized that I have choices or in Paul's words, freedom. I was standing still in the midst of the Spirit realizing that I do indeed have freedom to live a life of love, joy, peace and patience. In living guided by the Spirit, I am free to choose kindness over anger. I am free to choose generosity over dissention. I am free to choose gentleness over quarreling.

Self-indulgence also leads to a belief in scarcity – there's not enough of whatever and that leads to anger, quarrels, envy, etc. In living guided by the Spirit, there is a greater sense of abundance. How many times have you heard there is a shortage of joy, love, or peace? Yes, there is a shortage in examples of it at times but joy itself, love itself, peace itself – God gives this freely and abundantly. There is enough to go around, enough for us to share with our neighbor, enough to share with our family, enough to share with friends, with co-workers.

Yet, as the Galatians were caught up in a debate about one tenet of law, they were missing the point that the whole law is summed up in one commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." In other words, as they argued, they were not seeing each other as neighbor and as someone to whom they were bound to share love and joy and peace. In their distraction as they argued about

what it means to be Christian, they kept themselves from actually living in accordance of the law – loving they neighbor as yourself.

As the Galatians argued with each other about a detail, they were missing the bigger picture of loving their neighbor. As humans, we do it all the time. I know one church that is fracturing because clicks have formed between those in the know and those not. Communities become divided on how to zone for businesses or housing. School boards debate what is best for our children and their education.

It is Paul who reminds us today in his letter to the Galatians that we have the freedom, we have the choice to share love, joy and peace in our communities, school boards and all the places in which we gather. We can choose to love instead of hate. We can choose to be joyful instead of angry. We can choose to work for peace instead of working to fight against the perceived enemy.

With freedom comes responsibility so that we don't blindly share a fruit of the Spirit only to be victimized in some way. And we aren't perfect but Paul is encouraging us to try – try to love your neighbor, try to share one or two fruits of the Spirit, try to feel free - only freedom found in the Spirit for love of neighbor, love of self and God's endless love for us all. May it be so. Amen.