

BE GENTLE
(THAT PERSON MIGHT BE CARRYING A HEAVY BURDEN)

(09/22/2024)

Scripture Lessons: Philippians 4:4-9
Galatians 5:22-26
Matthew 5:1-9

“By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22-23)

As we enter into the beginning of another church year, we need to take some time to think about who we are as a church. We can, of course, proclaim lofty statements about our identity as Christians, our deep investment in this church community, and our commitment to mission. However, a more realistic or accurate depiction of who we are is evident in the way we relate to each other, the way we speak to each other or about each other, our sensitivity to each other, especially when one (or both) of us is going through a difficult time.

If we have truly been baptized in (or by) the Holy Spirit, if we are truly disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ, it should show in our relationships with the members of this special community and in all our relationships. We should manifest or make visible the “gifts or fruits of the Holy Spirit” that the disciples received at Pentecost. The apostle Paul tells us that these gifts or fruits will find expression in our lives. These personal qualities or personality traits are, or should be, characteristic of us as Christians.

The fruits of the Spirit, as described by Paul, are consonant with Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of heaven as expressed in the Beatitudes. They are characteristic of the ways that we think, feel, speak, and act if we find our center within this sacred realm, if we take on the heart and mind of Jesus, if we are guided by his Spirit.

The first of our scripture readings this morning was addressed to the Christians at Philippi in Macedonia, which is a country located just above Greece. They were the first congregation established by the apostle Paul on European soil, and he seems to have been exceptionally close to this church and its parishioners.

Paul tells his parishioners to “let their gentleness be known to everyone.” Paul reminds them that the spirit, the *charism* of their church is one of gentleness. He tells them that they are a special church, and that they should show this forth to the world.

We note, in sadness, that there are churches, there are denominations, there are religious institutions that do *not* show forth a spirit of gentleness. Several of the early churches apparently fell into this category. In Paul’s letters he scolds these churches,

tries to settle disputes among their leaders, and constantly reminds them of what it means to be a Christian church. The church in Philippi was not one of these dysfunctional churches. Neither, by the way, is our church.

Paul tells his parishioners not to worry. We recall that Jesus often told his listeners not to be anxious. I'm sure the people of Philippi had many worries, just as we do. We are concerned about what is happening in our country: the destruction of the environment, the income inequality that is hurting our economy and crushing the middle-class worker, and the rise of overt racism and anti-semitism. We are concerned about Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the toll that the ongoing war in the Middle East is taking on civilians, on men, women, and children who are caught in the middle of what appears to be dark genocidal forces on both sides.

This past year, over 2,000 documented cases of antisemitic incidents took place in our country. I am shocked at how successful the right-wing conspiracy-theory bloggers have been in convincing people that the problems in our country are attributable to immigrants, refugees, Jews, Muslims, Haitians, people who are trying to affirm their sexual orientation or gender identity, and women who are trying to claim the right to their own bodies, to their own reproductive system. We are encouraged to fear and then act out our anger on them in ways that violate our deepest values as Americans and as Christians.

I'm sure that neither Paul nor Jesus would blame us for being concerned about the state of affairs and the future of our country. There is a difference, however, between being concerned and being worried. Concern pulls us *toward* that which is the object of our concern. For example, it may lead us to think more deeply about the issues that frame our upcoming presidential election. Anxiety and worry lack this positive benefit. They actually pull us away from the source of our anxiety when we really need to move toward it.

Paul reminds us of the resource that is offered to us in prayer. He says, "in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Even when we share our concerns in prayer, we should do so in a spirit of thanksgiving, of gratitude. When we do this, even though we may be passing through a difficult time, "the peace of God, which passes all understanding" will guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus.

Paul instructs his parishioners in Christian maturity. He tells them to direct their attention to what is true, honorable, just, pure, and commendable. He tells them that they should "think on these things." If they do this, the God of peace will be with them.

Paul is telling us that we are not the passive recipients or victims of our emotions. Because we have the gift of consciousness, the gift of free will, we can direct our thoughts to that which builds us up rather than that which tears us down.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul tells his parishioners to “live by the Spirit.” He tells them not to engage in fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, and carousing. We seldom hear that word anymore: “carousing,” but apparently, we shouldn’t do it.

Paul says that if we engage in these baser thoughts, feelings, and actions, we “will not inherit the kingdom of God.” He tells us not to nurture feelings like envy and anger, but to nurture what he calls the “fruit of the Spirit.” The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. If we live by the Spirit and are guided by the Spirit, these qualities will show forth in our lives.

Paul is telling us that we can choose to be Christ-centric or Christocentric rather than ego-centric. We can actually practice compassion and increase our capacity for compassion. We can practice being gentle with others. As we do so, these traits, empathy and compassion, become an increasingly integral part of our nature.

Let’s think for a moment about how we can practice this spiritual discipline, e.g., at times when we are depressed, and what it would mean to do so from the perspective of intercessory prayer.

When we are depressed, we feel cut off from life. Our energy detaches from the outside world and sinks inward. The symptoms of depression are indicators of detachment or produce detachment. We lose our appetite. Things that normally give us pleasure no longer give us pleasure. We lose the desire to be with others. We feel helpless to change the present, and therefore we feel hopeless about the future. In the suicidal ideation that often accompanies clinical depressions, we not only detach from our future; we consider detaching from life.

There are many ways to treat depression. Even more important than “treating” depression, however, is *understanding* it. If we need to detach from something in our life, something that we have been grasping or to which we are attached in an unhealthy way, the depression may help us to do this. It may actually *insist* that we do this by making it difficult for us to continue in a way of life that is unhealthy. If we can respect the wisdom of the depression, if we can learn what it is that we need to let go, we may be able to detach and then reattach to life in a healthier, more meaningful way.

When we are depressed and lonely, we don't need to self-medicate with alcohol, food, or television. By the way, self-medicating with alcohol when we are depressed is not a great idea. When we do this, we are actually adding a depressant to a depression. I think it would be more constructive to go to the mall. Not to shop! I want to make that especially clear to my wife! We can go to the mall not to shop, but *to pray*.

When you sit on a bench at the mall, you will see many people walk by. These people are strangers. They mean nothing to you; they are not the object of your concern. They are, in fact, like objects. In the words of the Jewish theologian Martin Buber, your relationship with them is an "I-It" relationship rather than an "I-Thou" relationship.

It doesn't need to be this way. We may feel detached and separate from these strangers, but we are more attached to them than we realize. The Buddhists remind us that we are all not only interconnected on a very deep level; we are interrelated. On the very deepest of levels, we are one; we are all one in God.

In one sense we know little about these people who are walking by; in another sense we know a lot. We know that they are like us. They want to be happy. They want a sense of meaning in their lives. They want to be at peace with themselves and with others. They want to be involved in reciprocal loving relationships.

We know something else about them. We know that their life journey has probably not been smooth. We know that they have experienced times of pleasure and times of pain, times of happiness and times of sadness. There were times when they were healthy, and times when they were sick. If we sit on the bench long enough, we can bet that some of the passersby are struggling with life-threatening illnesses. We can also bet that many of them have already lost loved ones to death.

We know something else. No matter what their race or ethnicity, even if they wear a turban or a hijab, we know they are human--like us. They may not be experiencing all they would like to experience in life. By their actions they may even be undermining their chances to live the kind of life that they want to live. They may not be dwelling within the kingdom of God. You see--they are just like us!

We can sit on our bench and regard them as objects, or we can sit on our bench and regard them as people. When we think of the unknown crosses they carry, we could say a prayer for them. We could be gentle with them in our thoughts and prayers, knowing that they carry a heavy burden. We could look at them as they pass and wish them happiness, contentment, and joy. We could pray that they might be free of physical

and emotional pain. We could pray that they might find the strength to carry their burdens, and that they might rediscover their grounding, their center in God.

As we do this, we transform them from objects into persons. We transform them from strangers with whom we have the most superficial relationship to people about whom we care. Then, to push it just a step further, we could, in our imagination, in our prayer, take some of what we have: our joy, our happiness, our health, our nice home, our religious faith, and give it to them. We can do this because we are not living in a closed or a zero-sum system. The more we give away in prayer, the more we receive.

I have found this little exercise to be helpful to people who are depressed, including me. If we do this, it helps to dissolve the depression. I have also found that many of my counselees and parishioners are reluctant or resistant to even trying this. I wonder why. Is it because we secretly love to be miserable? Or is it because we are even more afraid of intimacy, the intimacy that comes when we relate to every passerby not as an object but as a person? I am always surprised how few people, even if they are deeply depressed, will even try this little imaginal exercise, this little exercise in prayer.

I think this little spiritual discipline could be beneficial to all of us. When we engage in this kind of prayer, we are giving expression to the fruits of the Spirit. We are also praying that the people who pass by in the mall, these people who are no longer objects but are people, will also experience the fruits of the Spirit. If you do this for just an hour a day, I think you would be surprised about how it changes your feelings. You would be surprised at the peace that you experience by giving it away to others!

Both Jesus and Paul tell us that we are not the passive recipients of our emotions. We create the world within which we live. We can dwell within the kingdom of heaven, or we can live in hell. It is up to us to decide.

There is a story about a Native American shaman. A Christian missionary once read him the passage in the Bible where the apostle Paul said that he felt at odds or at war within himself. The shaman said that he often felt this way. He experienced it as two wolves living within him.

The shaman said that two wolves live within us. One of these wolves is gentle, caring, compassionate, sensitive, and loving. The other wolf is angry, bitter, resentful, and mean-spirited. These two wolves are fighting for control of our soul. Whichever one wins the battle will determine the quality of our life.

The missionary expressed his concern. “Which of these wolves is going to win the battle for our soul?” he asked the shaman. The shaman looked at the missionary, smiled, and replied, “Whichever one we feed.”

By being here this morning, or by reading this little reflection, you are feeding one of the wolves.

Be gentle as you walk through life. The people whom you encounter may be carrying a heavy burden.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
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An audio version of this sermon will (hopefully) be posted on our website later this week.