

Trinity 14, 2021

“If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.” (Galatians 5.25)

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Last Sunday, we heard of the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Today’s readings go on from there with a scenario of what it looks like to “walk in the Spirit”. For example, today St. Paul urges the restoring of relationships. He says, “If a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such a one in the spirit of meekness, considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted”. The Gospel serves as an illustration of this point: ten men, separated from their families, are cleansed and their lives restored.

We are told that the ten men “stood afar off”. Having been ousted from their communities for being declared unclean, they were physically distancing themselves according to the Law of Moses. While sermons on this passage often talk about the spiritual meaning of leprosy, or the importance of being thankful, there is also this: Jesus cleansed these men, and told them to show themselves to the priest so they could be declared clean and return to their families – even the one who was a Samaritan.

We heard, last Sunday, about the vast difference between the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit. The two are polar opposites: the works of the flesh destroy relationships and the Spirit provides the possibility for reunion. So, as we think about “restoring relationships” let’s look at them both again: the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit. I invite you to join me in looking at page 238 of the Prayer Book. Would someone read from last week’s Epistle, beginning at the top of page 238 with, “But if ye be led by the Spirit...” (By the way, this passage immediately proceeds today’s Epistle in St. Paul’s Letter to the Galatians.)

*“But if ye be led by the Spirit, ye are not under the law. Now the **works of the flesh** are manifest, which are these: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you beforehand, as I have also told you in time past, that they who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. But the **fruit of the Spirit** is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there*

is no law. And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh, with the affections and lusts."

It is important to note that nine of the works of the flesh directly cause separation or broken relationships: hatred speaks for itself; variance is an old word for conflict; emulation is similar to jealousy; wrath is synonymous with rage; strife is bitterness and friction; sedition has to do with rebellion; heresy is the assertion of my opinion and an unwillingness to accept the truth; envy results in rivalries; and then there is murder.

These are the works of the flesh, and, by naming them, it is clear that they cause competition, discord, and chaos. Self will use any of these to try and scramble over others to the top of the heap. And so in this morning's Epistle, St. Paul says, "Let us not be desirous of vain-glory, provoking one another, envying one another." Instead, he offers a new way – the path of grace and the way of the Spirit: restore those who are overtaken in a fault; and bear one another's burdens. But how is that possible?

After all, restoring relationships is no small task; whether it is a spouse, a sibling, a friend, a neighbour, or a colleague -- a harsh word, a disagreement, or even a misunderstanding can often be the thing that results in a lot of hurt, and sometimes even the end of the relationship. What are we called to do as followers of Jesus Christ?

St. Paul offers some practical advice in just two words: "consider yourself". He says, "If anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of meekness; considering thyself (keeping watch on yourself), lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself."

In saying this, St. Paul is urging us to put ourselves in the other person's place. To see the situation from their point of view. Consider yourself lest you also be tempted. Try to remember a time when you needed another person's help and forgiveness. And, if anyone thinks they are something – if anyone thinks they are beyond that kind of need, they are only fooling themselves.

In an effort to follow St. Paul's direction, Everett Worthington of Virginia Commonwealth University suggests that we put ourselves in the other person's chair and try to imagine why they might have done what they did. He, himself, eventually did this after his 78 year-old mother was bludgeoned to death in a home invasion on New Year's Eve in 1995. At first, his reaction was to find the killer and beat him to death with a baseball bat, in an attempt to gain justice. But as a Christian, he knew that was not the right response.

Eventually, by God's grace, Everett Worthington came to a place of forgiving the young man – not just in terms of saying the words, but as a heart-felt, truly compassionate action. With God's help, he was able to “consider himself” – that is, his own attitudes and flaws. Through that process, he was gradually able to view his mother's killer as a human being who was loved and valued by God, in spite of his actions. St. Paul wrote how this should be the rule within the Christian Congregation; however, this was not his original idea. He was telling the Galatians what the Lord Jesus had taught about loving our enemies and blessing those who curse us. As we know, while He hung on the Cross, Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do”. (St. Luke 23.34)

Every week, Christians gather all over the world around the Altar to participate in the Holy Mysteries of Christ's Death and Resurrection. When we do that I am called to consider myself. In a very real way, I come as a repeat and perpetual offender, asking God for His mercy and forgiveness, so that my relationship with Him may be restored. Incredibly, He extends His grace to me yet again; not because of anything I can offer, but simply because of what His Son has done on my behalf, as my Sin-Bearer and Substitute.

I kneel there with my empty hands out, like a beggar. And yet God does not hesitate. Graciously, in perfect Love, He accepts my apology and absolves my sin. And then He feeds me. Knowing my soul's need for Love and assurance, He feeds me in the Holy Communion with the precious Body and Blood of His Son. He restores me. In that moment we rediscover the true meaning of God's Love, and the power of it. Although we do not deserve it, God, the Holy and Eternal Trinity, loves us. And, His Love is now alive and working in us by the Holy Spirit.

“If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit,” says St. Paul. Let us restore those who have been overtaken in a fault. Let us consider ourselves, and

remember the times we too have made mistakes; said hurtful things; or been selfish. Walking in the Spirit requires sacrificial love.

It involves committing ourselves to the work of forgiveness and restoration with difficult people. It requires us to walk a mile in that person's shoes. It involves looking at the hurt from a different angle. It will surely require us to cry out to the Lord about the injustice. And yet, if we persist, moving forward with humility and bearing the burden of the relationship with that other person, then we will find something holy and beautiful – something that is life-changing and life-giving -- something of God that is everlasting.

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”

And now unto God Almighty: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit...