

## Discipline

Psalm 104:24-30

Galatians 5:13-20

We spoke last week of how much conflict the Apostle Paul caused in his evangelistic ministry. There are, as another Paul, Paul Simon, wrote in his You Can Call Me Al “hints and allegations” throughout the New Testament that this conflict made him a bit prickly. Probably the best hint appears in the last verse before our passage. In Galatians 5:12 Paul writes, “I wish those who unsettle you would mutilate themselves!” This follows a discussion about how, now that Jesus has come, obeying the Jewish law no longer serves as the path to God's good pleasure. Paul has used the example of circumcision of males, the sign of the covenant required by the law of God for all Hebrew baby boys. Paul contends Christians do not need to get circumcised. The law no longer controls your destiny.

This chapter begins with the words, “For freedom Christ has set you free.” Our passage begins with, “For you were called to freedom.” Freedom in Christ does not mean the same thing as freedom from slavery, nor the same thing as constitutional freedom. Freedom in Christ means liberation from the restraint of the law of God as the sole means to salvation. Paul's thinking goes thus: so long as we were “under the law”, obedience to the Old Testament law of God was the one way to righteousness. But now Christ has freed us from that obligation. In Christ we enter God's blessings

through faith in Jesus as the Messiah. But does this mean, as the critics Paul wants to mutilate themselves charge, the end of the usefulness of God's law?

Not exactly. Paul cautions his readers not to “use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh.” He develops his thought by contrasting walking by the flesh and walking by the Spirit. Contrary to centuries of Christian misunderstanding, neither he nor any other New Testament author thought the human body, the flesh, is in and of itself unholy. They did think many of the things we *do* with our bodies are unholy. Paul lists a number of these: fornication, idolatry, jealousy, anger and the like. When the Black Death reached Europe in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Roman Catholic Church developed the idea this Plague was God's punishment for the sins of the body. Therefore, this “reasoning” continued, the remedy must involve chastening the sinful body. The most extreme version of this took form among the Flagellants, who walked around whipping themselves on the back. Absent any medical understanding of what actually caused the spread of the Plague—and of what to do to avoid getting it—this response seemed as logical as any.

The Flagellant movement had started in Northern Italy some one hundred years before the first Plague flea-infested rat from some distant Middle-Eastern port scurried off a ship into Europe. People saw the seemingly random and hideously rapid spread of the disease as an act of God. An act of judgment, of condemnation. Flagellants tried stopping it by conducting parades through the cities and towns, whipping themselves on the back while chanting Psalms. Christian historian Kenneth Scott

LaTourette writes, “Ironically, these events probably spread the plague even more rapidly.” After decades of total ineffectiveness in fighting the scourge, the Church finally decided the Flagellants were heretics and the movement died.

Yet there is something in the hearts and minds of many people that believes our bodies are sinful. We so easily give in to temptations. No matter how hard we pray, no matter how pure we try to stay, we fall. It must be our bodies' fault! Unfortunately, Paul chose the word “flesh”, which plays into this idea. But in Greek the word he picked for flesh does not actually mean the body itself. It means the attitudes and feelings associated with our physical beings. In line with this definition, “works of the flesh” refers not to walking or talking, or whipping yourself on the back, or being intimate with another body. It refers instead to our sinful nature getting acted out through our bodies. The body itself is neither good nor evil. Ah, but we are. Therefore, Paul writes, we must do our best to walk in the Spirit.

The author of Psalm 104 praises God comprehensively. “O Lord, how manifold are thy works!” God created the world and oceans—and the whales swimming in them. God feeds all, by which the Psalmist means spiritual as well as physical food. When God “hides thy face” (becomes less present in our lives) we become dismayed. He concludes our section with, “When you send forth your Spirit, they are created; and thou renewest the face of the earth.” Our NRSV capitalizes Spirit for good reason. This verse hearkens back to Genesis 1, where the “Spirit of God was moving across the waters.” The presence of God in creation, at the moment of creation, manifested

itself as this Spirit. The same Hebrew word can be translated “wind” or “breath” but the context in Genesis and Psalm 104 argues strongly for a personification, for God's physical presence in the form of God's Spirit.

Back in Galatians, Paul urges his readers to “walk by the Spirit,” again capitalized. He calls on us to govern our lives, not just our bodies, by behaving as God wants us to behave. We know what God wants, John Calvin told us, through that law of God found in the Old Testament, but also from the time-tested teachings of the church and not least of all, from our innate sense of right and wrong. It actually turns out to be rare for us not to know what we ought to do. Calvin believed this was evidence that the Holy Spirit still works within us. Paul lists examples of Spirit-led attitudes and behavior: acting in love, joy, peace and the rest of the list. Today I want to focus on two of these to show how they might lead us to “be servants of one another,” as Paul writes.

It surprised me to find joy in the list. It has always been there; I suppose I just gave it scant attention. Joy is more than happiness, more intense, more deep. How might we walk in joy? Asking for it in prayer. Fellowshiping with the people of God. Using the power of the Spirit to turn aside from dwelling on the things that frighten, anger and frustrate us. We know that in the Book of Acts, in Jerusalem and Corinth, people wondered whether these Christians were drunk all the time because they seemed so full of joy. At IU I lived on an unusual dorm floor in that guys tended to stay there all four years. We had a lot of fun and grew close. I still attend an annual

reunion of guys who lived on Wissler III in Teeter Quad. It is in fact the only reunion I attend. And while I assure you much of what we did decidedly did not qualify for walking in the Spirit, we also took care of each other.

One guy on the floor, Kevin, (his real name; he's happy for me to tell his story) was a caustic, angry young man. He had played baseball but messed up his knees water skiing and lost his shot at playing in college. This contributed to his sullen demeanor. He also utterly rejected the concept of any god. He mocked me for my faith until I told him to knock it off. We graduated and Kevin was not one of the guys I kept in touch with. About seven years ago he started turning up at our reunions. He was a completely changed man. His sunny disposition was so opposed to his old one we asked him about it. "I found God," he said. He followed that with words something like this: "I hated myself before but this guy at my company kept after me to go to a men's church group. I went the first time to a softball game. The guys were having fun but I could tell there was more to it. I went back the next week and then the next. And I'm sitting in this circle of men at one meeting and I felt...forgiven. Accepted. Loved even. I started crying. It started there. I'm not this happy all the time but before I never was." That is finding joy while walking in the Spirit.

I want also to focus on the last fruit of the Spirit listed by Paul: self-control. If we walk by the Spirit one outcome must be that we find the spiritual and emotional strength not to lash out at one another. We can find that in the Spirit, and we can reinforce it here in the church. It is Friday afternoon as I write these words. Over

lunch I checked into a news website and learned of the overturning of Roe v. Wade. I did a quick tour of news sources I have found trustworthy. On the PBS website I found a video that captured the entire range of emotions surrounding the moment. An enterprising producer had thought to use a drone to get an overhead shot. Two masses of people stood near the Supreme Court, facing each other. Ironically, the pro-life crowd stood on the video's left while the pro-choice crowd stood on the right. People were screaming. Megaphones dotted the crowds, and it seemed that every person carried a sign. Tears were common, whether of rage or happiness. And the hand gestures were...well, you can imagine.

I have no intention of taking a position on abortion from this pulpit. I will be glad to share my thoughts in personal conversations, but not here, and here's why: it might generate the kind of impassioned outrage that could easily rip apart this congregation. If that happened it would signify a failure of leadership on my part. And it could happen. We have had much smaller flareups over mask wearing policy and gun control. We must, every one of us, walk by the Spirit. We must control ourselves. If you can bring yourself to do it, listening to somebody with whom you deeply disagree—on this or any big issue—would display your Christian maturity and model for others how the Word of God calls us to conduct our lives. This is a tense time. Two ghastly presidential elections. COVID. Now this. Let every person having to listen to this lecture, including me, take it to heart. Walk in the Spirit. Control your actions. Love your brothers and sisters. Make peace. Be gentle. Control yourself. I pledge to do my very best, with God's help, to do the same.