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Proper 8, Third Sunday after Pentecost

Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields

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“If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.” In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Common to Paul’s writings is a sharp contrast between what he calls the Spirit and the Flesh, which here he aligns with two other dualisms: slavery and freedom and the Mosaic Law and Christ. Dualistic thinking may rightfully trouble us – it has warped some Christian teaching as it has separated souls from bodies. For centuries, this dualism has served the purposes of imperialist projects, which punished the bodies of oppressed peoples to “free” their souls. And we continue to see the negative effects of this dualism in our life today – from the bans on Trans folks in the military and the emotional scars and lingering shame from Purity Culture, to the immigrants who are welcome and those who are demonized in our racialized society. As Christians we reject and repudiate this dualistic dogma as it falls short of God’s revelation in the person of Jesus Christ who in his incarnation embraced our bodies, becoming both fully human and fully divine, fully Flesh and fully Spirit.

Paul’s dualisms reflect his own context: his training in Greek rhetoric, and the Hellenistic culture he and the communities he served shared. As a trailblazer of Christian theology, Paul was using what he had and what he and these communities knew in order to preach the Gospel. And, in spite of these seemingly stark contrasts, Paul, throughout his letters, makes it clear that our bodies matter and that our freedom should not be abused. He writes, “do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another,” echoing Jesus’ words at the Last Supper.

Here in Galatians, Paul goes on to argue that, just as the Mosaic Law served to create a shared identity and to prevent God’s children from “devouring one another,” especially the weak, the foreigner, the orphan and widow, so does the Spirit act in us. Here we can understand “the Spirit” as the Holy Spirit’s indwelling within each of us, sanctifying us and reconciling us through Christ to the Father and to the rest of God’s creation. Paul doesn’t let us forget that without the grace and guidance of the Holy Spirit, we would be lost: in verses 19 through 21 he lists the “works of the flesh,” warning us that “those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

Some of us may cringe at this list, reminded of how this list or other lists of vices in Paul’s letters have been used as weapons. It is important to remember these vices, like all things that destroy a social

order, are culturally contextual: in principle, they are all habits and compulsions, sometimes culturally sanctioned, which serve our own interest at the expense of the well-being of others and deny our interdependence on each other and on the rest of God's creation. This is not about pleasure. They are those behaviors that numb us, placate us, separate us, promise us pleasure or a false sense of freedom, while in actuality they lead us into cycles of addiction and dependence and leave us vulnerable to the Powers and Principalities of this world. In contrast, the works of the Spirit are those that recognize the sanctity of both our individual bodies and the collective body: they witness to a new order: the Kingdom of God that is breaking into our present reality.

Through the Spirit, we are liberated from assimilation, yet Paul makes it clear that everything, including our day to day behaviors, should be transformed to reflect our new life in Jesus: "the only thing that counts is faith working through love" (5:6) which produces good works, or "the fruit of the Spirit" (5:22). This imagery is from the wisdom tradition in the Hebrew scriptures. Psalm 1 reads that the righteous, or those whose "delight is in the law of the Lord," are "like trees/ planted by streams of water,/ who yield their fruit in its season,/ and their leaves do not wither./ In all that they do, they prosper" (vv. 2a, 3). Paul is remixing this idea, making the fruit the evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence in those who delight in Jesus Christ.

Now, the wording of v. 24 and 25 leaves it ambiguous as to how much the crucifixion of our "flesh with its passions and desires" is due to our own work or that of Christ and the Spirit's work in us. Although this ambiguity remains, Paul is clear that since good works do not justify us, any good works that are the "fruits of the Spirit" are also not just ours – they are God's and they are for others. Paul exhorts the church in Galatia and us here at St. Martin's to be "guided by the Spirit" (v. 25). Thus, a living faith in Christ is one that always assents to the Spirit's work – disavowing the claims of the world on our minds and bodies, and resisting the behaviors that make our own pleasure or prosperity or safety an idol. Instead, we turn to the example of our savior Christ, whose death and resurrection has made it possible for the Holy Spirit to dwell within us.

With St. Paul, we believe that the grace conferred in baptism has released us from the need to conform to anything other than Jesus Christ and that living by the Spirit means freedom: freedom from the fear of death; freedom from Empire; freedom from society's categories and expectations; freedom from laws or traditions that harm us; freedom from the fear of any power in this world to judge us: for Christ is our one true judge. By the power of the Spirit, we now are set free to love; we are set free to be faithful; we are set free to heal and to reconcile; we are set free to build and to plant; we are set free to set others free. Amen.