

June 26, 2016



“Living in the Spirit”

Sermon by Tricia Lindley

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

Galatians is a letter from Paul, written to address the community’s confusion about the Gospel message. Paul reassures them that new life in Christ is not the basis of one’s right standing with God, but the evidence of it, or the fruits of the spirit. A life in Christ leads to a life lived out in love.

Paul knew they were having trouble, they were struggling and confused and needing direction. The particular passage we read today is his most practical guidance in the letter - addressing the practice or what it looks like to live into a life of freedom that is guided by the Spirit.

Sometimes I assume that I have to do BIG things to “live in the Spirit” - and it seems overwhelming. What does it even look like? I’ve learned a lot from working with our children and youth over the past year - And each week, they teach me small but important things about living in the Spirit.

For example, last year we went to Slidell, Louisiana - outside of New Orleans for our youth service trip. After a particularly long and tiring day of house repairs in the extreme heat and humidity that you can only find in the deep south, I returned to our room with little energy and so tired. And on my bed, I found a surprise. It was a “warm and fuzzy.”

A warm and fuzzy in our youth group is a note of appreciation and encouragement. Throughout their service trip each year, the youth write these as a way of encouraging each other. A small gesture with a big impact.

That’s a little like what Paul is doing in his letter that we have from Galatians. He knows this new Christian community is struggling, they are tired and confused about their Christian faith and their community. They need support, they need guidance and encouragement and so Paul writes them a warm and fuzzy. It’s not quite the same type of warm and fuzzy we would write today, but it was the perfect one for this community.

For the past two years, I have lived in Claremont and attended school while commuting here to Santa Monica for work. My commute has involved some really crazy traffic. One of the first times I drove here, I looked on Googlemaps and it predicted I would arrive in 1 hour and 45 minutes for a 54 mile drive. “Wow - no way is that right” I thought to myself. But if you’ve lived here for more than a few weeks, then you know that it was definitely right.

Contrast that with growing up in Lubbock, TX. Where I thought there was traffic when each lane had one car and it meant I had to slow down or speed up to switch lanes, much less slowing down on a highway due to other cars and I most definitely never had to stop on a freeway.

This past week was my last week of driving back and forth from Claremont. Waiting in traffic, especially this week, has given me opportunity to reflect on this experience and the person I become in traffic.

When we are in our cars, we are our most vulnerable selves - isolated in a large vehicle with walls that separate us from others. We drift towards our shadow sides - you know what I mean...

- In the midst of too many cars, kindness towards others diminishes.
- In the midst of people weaving in and out of traffic, patience runs thin.
- In the midst of being cut off, our generous hearts harden and harsh words come to mind or out of our mouths.
- And sometimes that self-control lapses and we just want to keep that one car from getting in front.

We get in our car, with the best of intentions - and then traffic creates a perfect situation for thoughts and emotions to become a rollercoaster of low level frustration and the opposite of “loving our neighbor.”

The roller coaster of thoughts in our mind or feelings in our heart is not just connected with L.A. traffic. We begin with one thought reflecting about a project or relationship and before the end of the thought, our minds have wandered their way around a jungle of other thoughts that have nothing to do with where we started.

In the world of spiritual practice, they call this “monkey mind.” If you have ever tried contemplative prayer or meditation of any kind, you know what I’m talking about. The minute we become silent, listening for God - that’s when the insistent and urgent thoughts come up and our minds become overwhelmingly busy with thoughts, worries and ideas. Monkey mind is this experience of our mind doing the acrobatic tricks that distract us from listening to God.

But it’s like training for a race or learning a new skill - we must practice. Spiritual practice includes the word practice because it is not something that we “get” immediately. You run each day to build stamina for a race. You pray each day to build the spiritual muscles needed for the monkey mind to learn quiet and stillness in the midst of struggle and busy lives.

As we strengthen our inner life, as we attend to the monkey mind and begin tuning into God's spirit within us, speaking to us - we find our center. The fruits of the spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control -these are the spiritual muscles that grow out of and are strengthened by our spiritual practices. Our ability to be guided by the Spirit grows.

This coming month, our children's theme in Sunday school will focus on the "Fruits of the Spirit. They will be learning about how the Holy Spirit helps us to act in good ways. And each week, we will focus on a particular fruit of the spirit and stories from people of faith in our Scripture that live these out.

In the midst of exploring and discovering within this theme, the children will also prepare for their Faith in Action day at the end of July - an outward movement from their spiritual journey all month.

In our passage today, Paul's focus is a both/and - both inward and outward. It is about the Holy Spirit working within us - and it is about becoming strengthened so that the fruits of the Spirit might be lived out in our lives.

The children will hear Bible stories and learn about generosity and love and then they will live it out - by helping families in need through organizing the back-to-school supplies and backpacks that their church family collects over the month.

What are your practices that create space for the Holy Spirit to work in you? What might that look like over the next month? I invite you to adopt a spiritual practice along with our children this month. Perhaps: reading Scripture or walking in nature - centering prayer or the labyrinth, a warm and fuzzy to someone having a hard time or even practicing patience on the 405.

As you develop the practice, notice what shows up in your life - how you treat yourself, others, God's creation. Paul was so right - new life in Christ can be seen in us as the fruits of the spirit, a life lived out in love for others. Sometimes in big ways. But probably more often, in the small day to day and moment to moment, extending beyond ourselves. And when we forget, because we will - let us look to our youth and children's example for this life lived in the Spirit.

Amen.