

July 7, 2019 • Holy Communion

“Gospel of Love”

Homily by Tricia Guerrero



Galatians 6:1-10

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. For all must carry their own loads. Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher. Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

This past week, my mom and I went to see the new live-action Aladdin. We really enjoyed the movie and just like the palace guards, the community in our Scripture today, the Galatians, faced a similar challenge. In the beginning of the movie, we learn that the palace guards' loyalty is to the Sultan according to their laws, which are strictly upheld. Hakim is the head of the palace guards and when we hear his back story, we learn that his father worked for the Sultan as a palace servant. Hakim was raised around the palace; he is faithful and loyal to the Sultan.

When Jafar, the Sultan's second in command, turns on everyone and makes a wish to be the Sultan, Hakim is faced with a dilemma: do his loyalties lie with Jafar as the new Sultan, even though he used unjust means to be the Sultan or is there a greater law to follow? Jasmine confronts Hakim and asks him to go beyond the legalism of the law and consider the heart of the law and of his purpose. Paul is saying the same things to the Galatians - the greatest law is not about living by legalities or rules but about expanding ourselves to live using love as our guide, a way that restores and seeks freedom for all.

Paul established the church in Galatia. Like most communities, the Galatians got a little lost after their leader, Paul, left. Some in the community began teaching that everyone needs to observe certain laws and rituals, insisting that it puts you on God's good side. Paul writes this letter to redirect the Galatian community, reminding them of the greatest law - to love God and neighbor with your whole heart, mind and soul.

Today we heard Paul's last chapter in his letter to the Galatians, encouraging them to continue growing in Christian community, bearing one another's burdens and living by the Spirit in the law of love.

Ultimately, for Paul, love gets to the detail. Paul is giving practical instructions spelling out what it means to "live by the Spirit." Paul is talking about a shift out of old grooves, ways we are stuck. Paul's understanding of love is focused on life and renewal. Basically, God's love brings freedom. We celebrated the 4th of July this past week, which also gives us the opportunity to reflect on our freedom in Christ. As Nelson Mandela said, "For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others." God's love frees us, restores us and invites us into communities that are grounded in love.

Paul insists that life in the Spirit is NOT something we find alone or accomplish by ourselves. We know God's love by being grounded in loving community. And loving community is based on life in the Spirit. When we live into this, the community's purpose becomes one of restoring people and not defending laws for legalism's purpose.

This law of love is all well and good - and sounds nice to say. But let's be real.

Any time people come together in community, the reality never matches the ideal. We're all humans trying to do our best and we make mistakes, we focus on fairness over justice and we don't always treat one another with compassion and love. Paul is encouraging the Galatians towards the gospel of love lived out in real ways. He's reminding them to be with one another and to bear one another's burdens.

And today we are challenged in the same way. We are invited to ask ourselves: who do I share my burdens with? Who cares for me when I'm vulnerable and hurting? And how do I invite others to share their burdens with me? Who do I pray for and how do I care for them?

As many of our young adults know from experience, when you graduate from high school or go to college, you often stop going to church. It's incredibly hard to find new community in the midst of all that's required of you. It's also just plain hard to build community, to take the time and be patient while those relationships grow. It's never the same as what you had before.

This was my experience in college. My first two years were estranged from the church. When I went back home, I would go to my home church and all felt right again. But at college, church just wasn't part of my life. Then in my junior year, I had a renewed interest in spiritual community. At the same time, I was curious about other ways of worship and prayer. So I started visiting religious communities - different Christian denominations and also communities outside the Christian faith. I learned a lot about worship and prayer, about community, and about myself and my connection to God.

One day I found my way to Madison Square Presbyterian Church in San Antonio. They opened their worship each week with four statements. One person would hold up the Bible and say, "this is our book of memory." The next person would stand by the baptismal font and say, "This is our font of identity." Another person would stand behind the altar table and say, "this is our table of sustenance." Then the pastor would step forward, holding out her arms wide in welcome saying, "People of God, welcome home!" It was a beautiful

welcome and my heart felt at home each time I heard this. These four statements helped ground this community in belovedness, belonging, identity and radical welcome.

Ilene was the pastor at this church. She passed away this May. As I give thanks for her life and impact on me, I remember that she took time to get to know me. She invited me to tell my story and followed up to get me connected to the community. This was a time when I wasn't sure what I believed, my family was struggling with illness and death and I had so many doubts about God. I desperately needed answers to the big questions I was holding in my heart. Ilene took the time to listen to my questions and hear my grief, to walk alongside me with patience and strength. Her life modeled faith that was authentic, real and grounded in God's love for all people.

Ilene understood deeply what Paul was telling the Galatians. The gospel is about God's good news of love for each of us, for the whole world. Paul's gospel of love means that we are to treat one another in a loving and gentle manner. It means that we take time for people's pain and suffering and we share one another's burdens.

And so, we are invited to go forth into this new week, embracing our freedom in Christ and living by the law of love. Let us each ask ourselves: *How do we, as a community, hold one another in love and share one another's burdens?* I pray, with Christ as our guide, that we continue to become a community who lives this law of love for ourselves and for each and every person who comes to our doors.

May it be so. Amen.