

Nov 4 – Known by Our Actions

Galatians 5:16, 22-26

Today we come to the most beloved verses from Paul's letter where he talks about the Fruits of the Spirit. For most of the letter, Paul has been writing in a very technical way, justifying his style of ministry to the Gentiles which has been opposed by those from Jerusalem. Paul has been writing about his authority, the power of the Spirit over the Law and now it seems that he finally wants to bring it down to the practical.

We often make faith more complicated than we should. Paul says that we are known by our actions. If you follow Christ, you produce the Fruits of the Spirit. So, this is a time of self-evaluation. These words, as we will see, give us a good way of evaluating how we are doing in our walk with God. It is a time for all of us to refocus, to seek forgiveness when we see where we are not living out fully the Fruits of the Spirit, and it is a time to set goals for living so we can continue to grow in our faith.

This most famous verse from Galatians is in answer to one of the challenges that those who came from Jerusalem were using for the power of the Law. They had been saying that without the Law everything would dissolve into chaos. The entire Jewish faith and life was based on these laws. It was how you knew you were faithful. It was how you made moral decisions. These people from Jerusalem were saying that without the Law anything goes!

Paul, in this part of the letter, now addresses the question of how the community can receive moral guidance in the absence of the Law. In verse 16 he says, Walk by the guidance of the Spirit. If you do so, you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. Paul proclaims that a Spirit-filled life will ultimately help us to live a more moral life than even one based on Law! This is a radical thing for a former Pharisee to proclaim.

You might be thinking, "Why is walking by the Spirit the effective way to hold the desire of the flesh in check?" Too often we get caught up in the minutiae at this time. We look at Paul's list of the things of the flesh and use them as labels for those who are not of the Spirit. They are examples. Paul is saying things of the flesh are selfish desires. Anytime we put our wishes, our wants, before what God wants, that is of the

flesh. Likewise, when we talk about the Fruits of the Spirit, they are again examples. When we put God first, these are the types of attitudes and life styles that follow. So, instead of getting too focused on the lists, think self-centered verses God-centered.

Paul explains that the two are fundamentally opposed. Flesh asserts itself anywhere that self-seeking human desire opposes the divine will and the wholeness of the community. That is a bit hard to swallow, isn't it? We can look at the list that Paul gives and think, I am okay, I don't do those things. But who among us hasn't been guilty of at times putting self interest in front of what God is wanting us to do? See, these words are a call to reflection, forgiveness and growth.

It is likely the Jerusalem missionaries had said you need the Law to resist these impulses. Paul says the Spirit of God is powerful enough to overcome the desire of the flesh.

The missionaries' message that the Law is necessary to provide ordered governance for the community is powerfully appealing. It taps into a deep and persistent need for rules and structure. Paul insists, however, that the security offered by the Law is false security. And yet we still long for a rule-based faith. It is comfortable to not have to think and have someone tell you what to do! To know that you do this and you are good, do this and you are cursed, seems to be the certainty that we want in faith. What Paul realized, and it is something we still need to respond to, is that this ultimately has the potential of creating a dead lifeless faith. You follow the rules because you are supposed to. You make sure you don't do anything too rash but you never ask what God is calling you to do.

I have been teaching during Trinity U about the famous people from Methodist history. We talked about our founder John Wesley who, when at Oxford College, tried to live a faith so structured that his fellow students called the group, the "Holy Club" or "Methodist." Though Wesley tried to organize all of his life as to faith, it brought him no comfort. It was only as he was open to the Spirit and experienced his "Heartwarming Experience," that he began to not only know God in his life but began to understand how he was to live in faith and why. It was no longer just following rules but being led by the Spirit, which sometimes caused him to break the rules!

Paul says that by your fruits you are known. We need to realize that this list of the Fruits of the Spirit is more than what any one individual can do. I doubt any of us can feel that we would be known as living fully all these gifts. It is a work in progress. It points us to where we need to grow. I believe Paul was saying that this list is the way the Spirit's work is made manifest in community. As a people of faith Trinity should be known as a place these gifts are being lived out.

We need to understand that Paul is not directly exhorting the Galatians to cultivate these qualities. Nowhere does he say, you need to work on being joyful today, and loving tomorrow and we can wait on kindness until next week. Rather he is saying that this is the harvest the Spirit produces. If you are Spirit-filled you will feel joy, you will love others, you will find yourself being more patient.

So in some ways it is self-diagnostic. You pause to ask how are these Fruits of the Spirit being made manifest in my life? That examination will always point you towards areas of growth. You should also look at our church and see if it, as a faith community, exhibits these fruits. If so, the Spirit of Christ is alive. If you see areas where we are lacking, you should ask what can I do to make it better?

The list of fruits begins with Love, a key element for Paul. In Corinthians Paul says this is the one gift of the Spirit that should be manifest in all. So if you are a bit more right brained and need a task, a goal, because all of this follow-the-Spirit is a little squiggly for you, Paul would say, I think, work on Love. That will provide a good soil for the rest of the gifts to grow. This is true as individuals and as a congregation. Also, it is significant that he ends with self-control, a term that is set in deliberate contrast to the drunken revelry that concludes the list of the works of the flesh. This is particularly significant as a response to the missionaries who claim that only the Law could provide a means of controlling the fleshly impulses.

In closing let me give you an example of how this can work in the life of a faith community. There was a disagreement in the church between two factions. It had not been resolved and over time it had continued to fester. It was slowly leaking the poison of discontent into the life of the church infecting everything. It had been going on for some time when I was appointed pastor there. I had heard some of the story before

arriving. It came down to the fact that some of the congregation had attended a spiritual renewal retreat and others had not. Over time those who went to the retreat began to think that what they learned at that retreat should be for everyone. They wanted to sing certain songs, praise God in certain ways and...you get the idea. Others, who had not gone and did not want to go felt like they were being made to be second class citizens in their own church. I arrived and on the surface everything seemed great. The people were polite and loving. The finances were good. I wondered if there really was a problem. Then we had a first Ad Council meeting. It seemed that every decision was challenged. If someone from one side of the worship debate was chair of a committee proposing something the other group immediately had a negative view. Several key members were drawing lines in the sand. It became all about self. What I want. How I want to worship. What I think is important. The church was not expressing many of the Fruits of the Spirit. I soon went to one of the retreats at the request of the one group. The other group thought I had gone over to the dark side just like the other pastor. Upon returning I went to a reunion meeting. All were so happy the new pastor was there. Then I said, "I learned that the goal of this retreat is to be open to the Spirit and to share the Love of God" They all nodded in agreement. Then I said, "In the short time I have been here I have not seen this group acting very loving to those who are not comfortable with the retreat format. Also, I see very little acceptance of how the Spirit could be working in a person's life separate from the retreat. I believe we are called to repent." There was stony looks. But that call to community, to love, to celebrate how God is at work in many ways sank in. We began to see a willingness from the one side to listen more, and that opened up the other group to be more accepting. I am not saying the issue was resolved before I left. A few left because I would not fully support the retreat vision. But for most a call to be guided by the Spirit, after setting self aside caused growth.

So, Paul tells us that as individuals and a church we are known by our fruits. How are you doing and how are we doing as a church community? Remember we don't work to get these gifts. If we want to improve we open ourselves to the Spirit, trying to live fully what God asks us to do, focusing on Love and ultimately we will begin to see our selfish desires moving out of the center and those Spirit gifts flourishing in their place.