

“God’s Unseen Footprints”

Psalms 77:1-3, 11-20

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

In my former church I found myself in a conflicted relationship with an Elder. I didn’t appreciate his attitude and way of doing things. Hierarchical and hardnosed, controlling, a former railroad executive, we butted heads. I can’t remember what he said or did, but I recall the feeling of anger and vengeance welling up within me toward him. I glared at him when he was in the office one day, refusing to speak civilly or at all. My nonverbal signals conveyed disdain. I was sending daggers through my eyes.

It was an immature, passive aggressive response on my part. The full force of my lower nature was being turned loose for the ride. In my mind I felt justified. I found it easy to rationalize. It didn’t go unnoticed, believe me. Paul would not have described me as being led by the Spirit.

Late that afternoon I received a phone call. He called me on my attitude toward him. I played dumb and said there was nothing wrong. He assured me such wasn’t the case. He asserted that he would be there in a few moments. The angry coward in me was being forced out of the hole that I had dug.

So there we sat, face to face. I owned my issue with him. He did the same. As we talked things began to settle between us. He looked at me and said, “Nobody has ever roughed you up before, have they?” As he told me how he had been roughed up as a younger executive I suggested that he was returning the favor. He agreed. I guess he thought that I needed to get “roughed up”. I think he meant it as a way to put me in my place and assert his authority over me. At that point we got as far as we were going to get in the relationship.

As I reflect on Paul’s admonition to live by the Spirit and not the flesh, my experience is that I was weaving in and out of both, not one exclusively.

The undercurrent of Paul’s remarks to the Galatians invites us to examine our motives in the way we relate to one another. He asks that we look at what is controlling our approach to people. Are we allowing the Spirit of God to shape our responses or simply acting out of the passion of our flesh in the moment while disregarding the Spirit’s nudges?

Paul offers the Galatians a choice. He reminds them, “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’”. He then looks at the alternative; “If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another”.

Unless we solve the problem of living and ministering together we will make life in community impossible. And that responsibility falls upon each one of us. We are not left without choices as to where the primary influences will lie. Paul is shifting the conversation from theology to ethics. The key of any theological understanding lies in the acid test of daily living. Christianity is ultimately practical, not simply a head trip of sophisticated theological debates. It is a matter of the heart, not just the head.

Paul is asking what the moral equivalent of the law might be if, as he argues, we are free from it. What will guide our lives to a level of living we could otherwise not attain? We need, Paul is saying, an “explosive power of a new affection” giving width and life to our morals and relationships. Paul is telling us that the source for this lies not in an external authority centered in a book of laws or building our spirituality on other peoples’ ideas and teachings. Rather, it is about an Internal Presence guiding us. Paul is not negating the flesh, per se, but moving us to consider what primarily motives our behavior toward others.

Pascal frames it this way; “Perfect are the good desires Lord that you have given me. Be their end as you have been their beginning”.

So Paul returns to the core of what the Christ life in us is doing. Listen. “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love”.

This is where we will discover freedom in our lives. It will be through the reception and faith in the working of Christ’s love within. When Paul writes, “For freedom Christ has set us free”, he is not talking about freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence. He would not agree with author and philosopher of sorts Ayn Rand who defines freedom as “To ask nothing. To expect nothing. To depend on nothing.” (Wikiquote). Nor would he agree with Rand’s assessment that, “If any civilization is to survive, it is the morality of altruism that people have to reject” (Wikiquote). Paul is asserting the opposite, that selfishness in the end does not exalt a person, it destroys the person and the community.

Here is what he writes; “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”. Freedom is found only when one acts in accordance with the law summarized by the command “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”.

We might frame it in a question. What do I love? Calvin College professor, James K. A. Smith, notes that we are not shaped by what we think but rather what we love. Are the affections of my heart oriented to the selfish pursuits of my temporal goals or the exploitation of others for personal advantage in whatever form that might take? Or are my affections oriented to God and what God desires for me, the people in my life, and God’s creation? Those are two very different trajectories. What am I nurturing in my life and where is that taking me?

Peterson’s ‘The Message’ relates this well. Let me share it with you. Focusing first on the trajectory of the self, he translates Galatians 5:19-21 this way: “It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; and impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on”.

Smith illustrates a true story that occurred around 1914 after the Titanic had sunk. In January of that year, the *Monroe* was rammed by a merchant vessel, the *Nantucket*, which eventually sank, taking the lives of forty-one sailors. The *Nantucket* captain, Osmyn Berry, was arraigned on charges. During the trial it was Captain Johnson, reported by the *New York Times*, who had navigated the *Monroe* with a steering compass that deviated as much as two degrees from the standard magnetic compass. His steering compass had never been adjusted in the one year he was captain of the *Monroe*. The *Times* said that "Later the two Captains met, clasped hands, and sobbed on each other's shoulders?"

Smith points out that the sobs of these seamen is a tragic reminder of the consequences of mis-orientation. Think about this in terms of the heart. It, too, is like a compass and needs to be regularly calibrated and redirected to our Creator (Smith, "You Are What You Love", p.20).

The calibration of our hearts is a constant process. We do not instantly manufacture or manipulate these gifts of the Spirit. Rather, over the course of a lifetime as we develop the habits of worship, prayer, bible study, service, and engage in spiritual disciplines directed to nurturing a relationship with the Spirit of God, we are creating the conditions for these gifts of God to develop.

When in the state of Washington I had opportunity to spend time at a working farm and apple orchard outside of Yakima, Washington, Campbell Farm. It was owned by the Synod of Alaska-Northwest and a conference center for the church.

The soil had to be tended for the crops and apples to produce their fruit. Seeds were planted, weeds removed, irrigation for water, pests treated, and then, of course, the waiting for growth. The fruit wasn't manufactured. The role of those who tended and farmed was to participate in the natural process. The farmer didn't cause anything to grow.

It is the same in the realm of growth in the Spirit of God. We create the condition that gives the fruit of God's Spirit to grow. We tend to the soil of our hearts in this case. Can I will patience, love, joy, self-control, kindness, generosity, or any of the other fruits of the Spirit? It doesn't work that way.

Each year we show the film "Evan Almighty" to the confirmation class. Steve Carell plays Evan Baxter, a congressman from New York. God calls him to build an ark in his upscale suburban neighborhood. His wife, Joan, becomes confused and shaken by his behavior and after some humorous moments decides to take the kids and leave weird Evan.

While eating at an out of town restaurant a waiter, Morgan Freeman who is playing God, approaches their table, his name tag reading "Al Mighty". He notices Joan is in trouble and engages her in conversation. She tells him about her husband and the ark and what she might do with this crazy spouse.

Earlier both Baxter's had prayed for their family to become closer as they began this new chapter in their lives. As Joan talked, the waiter asks, "If someone prays for patience, do you think God gives them patience? Or does God give them opportunities to be patient?"

“If someone asks for their family to be closer, do you think God zaps them with warm fuzzy feelings? Or does God give them opportunities to love each other?”

As Henri Nouwen observes, “fruitfulness comes from our vulnerability and the admission of our weakness” (Public Address at Yale, March 30, 1995, *Homiletics*, May-June, 2016, p.71).

There is a paradox of sorts here as Paul directs us to real freedom. The reformer Martin Luther expresses it in these words; “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all”.

Christian freedom is nurtured in the soil of our hearts and lived out in a love that places us in the lives of others as servants. I conclude with ‘The Message’ and its response to the question, “But what happens when we live God’s way?”

“He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard---things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely”.

Through it all, as God’s love is formed in our hearts and we nurture that grace, the unseen footprints of the Spirit show up in all that we are and do in this life. Not only our own lives, but all others around us are the beneficiaries.