

Pentecost 6 Sermon  
Luke 9:51-62

When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village. As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Second Lesson: 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: 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.

## Live By the Spirit

The ministry of Jesus was hard for his contemporaries to understand for many reasons, not the least of which was his willingness to go where others would never have set foot. Last week, we saw how Jesus ventured off to a Gentile area in order to heal a man who lived in a ritually unclean place—a cemetery, and thereby demonstrated that God’s Kingdom had come near through his ministry. This week, on his way to Jerusalem, he deliberately takes a shortcut from Galilee to Judea by travelling through Samaria instead of using the approved Jordan River Valley route around Samaria. As John put it in his gospel, “Jews had no dealings with Samaritans.” And not only that, he actually sends messengers ahead in order to ask for a place to stay and presumably something to eat.

Predictably, the messengers are rebuffed, and Jesus had to move on to friendlier territory. Two of his prized disciples are provoked to anger by this insulting treatment and suggest that these people deserve the same divine retribution as that given to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah as told in the book of Genesis. Both the inhospitable action of the Samaritans and the righteous indignation of James and John indicate just how deep the hostility went between Jews and Samaritans. It was not good. Jesus, on the other hand, demonstrates no such thing, and after “rebuking” his overzealous disciples for their angry reaction, simply decides to move on from where he’s not wanted. This behavior on his part would have been seen as highly unusual to say the least. “Where is he coming from?” we might ask. Perhaps he is just being practical by avoiding an unnecessary conflict. But if that were the case, surely he wouldn’t have rebuked the disciples for their understandable indignation. There is something more going on here.

Recall, Jesus’ ministry was all about demonstrating what it looked like for the power of God’s Kingdom to come near. God’s Kingdom introduces a power or a sphere of influence that changes things for the better. It is like receiving a glimpse of how things will change when the Kingdom comes in all its glory somewhere in the future. The ministry of Jesus gives us a foretaste of God’s power to change and redeem this world” to save it from sin and death. And so, where Jesus goes, the blind see, the lame walk, the sick are healed, the dead come back to life, and tax-collectors and sinners become apostles and saints.

Could it be that here too we are seeing something that pertains to the power of God’s Kingdom, otherwise known as the power of God’s love at work through the gift of the Spirit? I suggest this because the potential for a highly combustible confrontation is avoided by the way in which Jesus handles this situation. And not only that. The disciples are shown what Paul called “a more excellent way” to deal with this anger, namely, let it go.

Our second reading for today is a text that casts light on and helps us understand what Jesus does in the face of this dangerous situation. And that's what it was. It could very easily have degenerated into open conflict where people got hurt. In the Galatians text, Paul refers to the behavior of both the Samaritans and the disciples as "work of the flesh." Several of the words he uses here apply: "...enmities, strife, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions..." All of these describe some aspect of what's going on here.

Paul is addressing a situation where those things are also going on. He had established that Christian community by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ---the way in which we also can share Jesus' message that the Kingdom of God has come near, for this is the way in which the power of God's Kingdom—God's Spirit of Love—brings redemption and healing to others—and invites people to believe and trust in this good news. And he succeeded. A church was born.

Unfortunately, some folks, who did not like Paul's idea that God achieved redemption in our lives through the gift of the Holy Spirit working in our hearts as we hear the gospel, sowed discord and distress among the Galatians by preaching a law-oriented message, going so far as to say they had to be circumcised. So, Paul, in order to deal with this distortion of Jesus' message, wrote this very influential epistle, one which would later have a huge impact on the Reformation.

In this section of the letter, Paul is talking about the effect the gift of God's Spirit has on our lives by describing what it produces in our hearts and in our actions—a description that puts Jesus' behavior in Luke 9 in perspective.

"Live by the spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh." "Flesh" here translates the Greek word *sarx*, a word that refers to self-centered passions or feeling provoked out of a concern for the self to the exclusion of anyone else. The law was given to govern these passions so that human behavior could be checked and not get so out of control that chaos resulted. If you look at the words, they all refer to behavior that has gotten out of control, situations where behavior is controlled by passion rather than the other way around, where passions and feelings are kept in check. Sexual passion out of control, anger where people are at each other's throats, and drinking that results in drunkenness. While some may think of this as freedom, it's the opposite--unless you want to define freedom as the lack of self-control where you no longer have the ability to choose what you do.

This is what was bubbling up around Jesus when his disciples wanted to destroy the Samaritans with fire from heaven. Just a bit of an overreaction.

Those who preached a law-based gospel were concerned that people understand that such things were sinful and contrary to God's will. So far, so good. But here's the thing: the law doesn't change the human heart. All the law can do is curb passion like a bit and bridle control a horse or a beast of burden. Is that what we are? Is the law the only way to control sinful behavior? You might think that after hearing a news

broadcast or maybe even by being honest with yourself. However, this is not freedom in its deeper sense where we don't need to be controlled by a coercive law, nor is it the power of God's Kingdom.

This is why it's frustrating when people have the impression that the Christian faith is primarily about doing this and doing that; laws that govern the conscience can make people do this or do that. And you certainly don't need to hear anything about God's Kingdom to provide moral codes whereby bad behavior can be suppressed. There are plenty of secular moral codes that can do that. This does not get at the message of the gospel and this is what Paul is concerned with, namely, that his detractors had taught the Galatians a different gospel from the one they had originally heard from him. They were preaching the gospel based on law; the idea that sinful passions can only be controlled by some moral code, and that consequently, we are brought close to God's Kingdom through the law. This is not what Jesus taught, and it was not what they had originally heard from Paul.

Rather, Paul is saying here, faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ results in a changed heart so that these so-called "works of the flesh" no longer need to be suppressed by a concerted effort to conform one's behavior to the law. Faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ brings with it the gift of the Spirit, and it's God's Spirit of love that changes the human heart.

When we live by the Spirit, as Paul urges, which is another way or urging us to open up our hearts to the power of God's love, this changes our hearts in the sense of enabling us to freely choose to live differently. We don't have to let the negatives in life create these so-called "works of the flesh" (enmities, jealousy, strife, anger, hopelessness, and drunkenness). While there's much in life we can't change-- how other people behave, the challenges we may face, strife in our families, our communities, and in our world—we can control how we react to the Downers through the power of God's love, received by faith.

How does this change our hearts such that we no longer have to rely on a law to govern our actions and reactions? Paul lists the things that the power of God's love produces in us: joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, self-control, and--of course—love. As Paul says, there is no law against these things. To be guided by the spirit of God's love is to allow the gift of God's love to change our hearts so that we have the freedom to let go of negativity and act in ways that make a positive difference.

Is this not what Jesus does when he encounters both the hostility of the Samaritans, and the angry reaction of his disciples? He rebukes the anger and moves on without any need for revenge. This is the power of God's influence at work in him. This power, influence, rule—there are many words for it—all boils down to the fact that God's presence in our lives is love, and love changes people. What Jesus did here is an example of how God's love effects how we live.

Finally let me say that this is why spirituality—prayer, God’s Word, worship, devotions, and practicing generosity—is so important. No one is ever going to fully embody [all] these spiritual virtues. We are not perfect people. But we are on a path that gives us what we need to become more spiritually healthy. We are guided by the Spirit by receiving God’s love as it comes to us through these spiritual practices. We are growing in the Spirit, not perfected in the Spirit.

The power of God’s Kingdom—God’s love” comes to us as we receive the Gospel by faith. This is how the Spirit works in our lives and changes our hearts as we receive the gospel day in and day out through faith. And the fruits of the spirit-- joy, peace, love, generosity—these things result in behavior that looks for the good, service that makes a positive difference. This is what we are called to, and this is what makes our good works good.

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