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SERMON

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Living in the Spirit

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Introduction

This morning, we continue our series asking, “What are we here for?” And we jump into Paul’s letter to the Galatians. I won’t bury the lead today. We are here to live spiritual lives. Paul speaks again and again of the Spirit’s presence, movement, and transformative power to the churches in Galatia. This, at a time when they sought more tangible signs of assurance that they truly belonged to God and were doing the right things.

Paul doesn’t provide a checklist of dos and don’ts for Christians—though sometimes this reading is misunderstood to be just that.

Instead, Paul reminds them that they are free. There are no lists. There is no fear. There is no podium at the end of the race.

What will they do with their freedom?

Paul urges them to embrace a spiritual life. in the Spirit
Grounded in God’s love.

Guided by God’s Spirit within them.

To our modern ears, embracing the “spiritual” can sound like withdrawing from the world. We might imagine a spiritual person as disconnected from the real pain of life, unbothered, so heavenly focused that they’re no earthly good, or—perhaps in our secular age—so inwardly focused that they’re no outward good.

Nothing could be further from the truth for Paul. He does not let spirituality become escapism. Just as he does not allow freedom to become a-free-for-all of selfishness.

So, listen this morning in our Scripture reading, not for a checklist or scorecard, but for an invitation to a different way of life.

Before we listen for God's word to us today, please join me in prayer:

Prayer for Illumination

Spirit of the living God,
quiet the noise within us and around us.
Open our hearts and minds to your Word,
that we may hear not a list to master,
but a life to receive.
Guide us in truth and love. Amen.

Scripture: Galatians 5:1, 13-25

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

13 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 enslaved to one another. 14 For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 15 If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

16 Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 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. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. 19 Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, 21 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.

22 By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. 24 And those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Dashboard Lights

I was driving down Washington Rd. when a light on the dashboard started flashing.

There was traffic; it was icy; it would take 20 more minutes to make it home. Flashing seemed bad. And it looked like an exclamation point, which— in this context—was not encouraging.

I called my husband, Ed. This is what partners are for, right?

Your own personal google.

"It's an exclamation point!" I told him.

"Is it in a circle?"

"Yes, well, kind of."

"Yes or no...that can be the brakes."

"I mean, it's not really a circle, more of like parentheses with a squiggly underline."

I am sure a very intelligent, thoughtful person came up with these symbols, but they are completely beyond me.

It turned out not to be the brakes. It was low tire pressure. I wasn't in danger, but it was a warning, something needed my attention, sooner rather than later.

Paul illuminates dashboard lights for the Galatians. There are signs that things are going off track.

Things like drunkenness, sorcery, carousing, quarrels, and factions.

It's a strange list, especially to read in the 21st century. Some of you may have done some carousing this week, but I doubt any of us were involved in much sorcery.

But beneath the antiquated language, Paul's warning lights are an invitation to slow down, to check our engine, to phone a

friend when our lives are becoming untethered or ungrounded.

Embracing Freedom

Let me back up.

Paul spends much of this letter confronting false teachings that were tearing the Galatian churches apart. Teachings that said grace was not enough. That belonging to God required more. That unless they followed certain Jewish customs and laws, they were still on the outside.

Those teachings made the Galatians insecure in their relationship with God, unsure of their place in God's story, and judgmental of one another.

One commentator describes Galatians as overhearing one side of an angry phone call.

Paul tears down the walls they had built between one another and between themselves and God, brick by brick, reminding them of what is true:

You belong to Christ.
You are saved by grace.
You are free.

The problem was not that the Galatians lacked God's love. The problem was they were living as if love wasn't enough. As if they needed to prove their worth to others.

Paul takes them back to their baptisms.

Whatever in their ordinary lives privileged them over others or led to their inferior treatment, was washed away in baptism. As Jesus told his disciples, “Gentiles lord over one another— not so with you. The greatest will be a servant of all.” Or as Paul passionately argues, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, you are all one in Christ.”

The truest thing about each of us, as true now as it was 2000 years ago for the Galatians, is that we are beloved children of God.

We’re free. No checklists to complete. No competition to wage against one another. You are a child of God and so am I. And that is the truth that anchors our freedom in love. We are freed to serve. Freed to love radically. Because we have nothing to prove, and we recognize the beloved child of God in each person.

Sermon done? Easy peasy.

Life in the Flesh

Paul realizes that he can repeat this and repeat and repeat until he is blue in the face, but the Galatians so easily forget. And the warning lights start flashing. In their lives, they find themselves angry, jealous, defined by factions. Some flee into escapism, wine and parties and inappropriate relationships. Others lean in for more control, trying to get the upper hand. In the translation of Scripture that I read, Paul calls this “self-indulgence” or “gratifying the desires of the flesh.” But the

actual word is sarx. It's not about rejecting our bodies or viewing our physical world as bad or a puritanical list to keep our bodies in check. Sarx is ego. To gratify the desires of our sarx is to live in the ego, to live driven by self-reliance, self-protection, and self-interest.

Thomas Merton called this the false self.

The false self is untethered from grace. It is shaped by fear, comparison, and control. It convinces us we're in charge—even as there are fewer things harder to manage than an enlarged ego.

Paul reminded the Galatians of their truest selves. Beloved children of God. Free in love, to love. But then their egos, whether from fear or shame or arrogance, would take the wheel.

Maybe we shouldn't be too hard on them.

I'll speak for myself. I say week after week that God created us, loves us, forgives us, and walks with us. That grace is enough, that we belong, that there is nothing to prove and nothing to earn. And that love sets us free us to love others.

Then Monday comes. Or even Sunday afternoon.

And a Facebook post can untether my heart to love. A news report of cruelty can toss and turn me from hope to despair.

Another family's vacation plans or house renovations or strong opinion about what all kids need to be doing or not doing can spiral me into jealousy, inadequacy, and competition.

The dashboard lights start flashing.

When you notice that you are grasping for control of others or your circumstances, when you notice that you get home and just check out, scrolling, gaming, drinking, when you notice that you're carrying anger at people you barely know or you're sinking deeper into despair because you're checking every alert as it pops up, or you're comparing your life to the highlight reel of others.

Exhale.

It's time to pull the car over. It's time to see what's going on under the hood.

It's not enough to be reminded of who we are. We have to live it.

To walk, day by day, moment by moment, in the Spirit. To head the warning lights and return to the freedom of grace that is grounded in love.

Living a Spiritual Life

I've taken the car metaphor about as far as it can go, so let me switch gears...that was a car joke.

“Live by the Spirit,” Paul says...”the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

Fruit doesn't grow on its own. Jesus told his disciples this. I am the vine and you are the branches. Abide in me as I abide in you. Bear good fruit.

Christ calls us to live a spiritual life, to exhale into freedom, and to live from the truest part of ourselves. And this is not just for our sakes, but for the sake of the world.

Because the love that transforms our hearts is the same love that transforms the world.

Living a spiritual is not to be so heavenly focused that you're no earthly good. It's to be a bridge between heaven and earth within your own heart and through your own hands.

Rev. James Lawson ought to be as much a household name as other giants of the Civil Rights Movement, like Rosa Parks or Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. or John Lewis. Rev. Lawson taught the philosophy and practice of nonviolence to John Lewis and other students, who would become SNCC, the Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee.

Lawson had studied theology and had taken seriously the call to peacemaking. He went to India as a Methodist missionary and, there, studied Gandhi's principles of nonviolent resistance to systems of injustice.

Returning to the states, he reached out to Dr. King, who urged him to turn his theological study into practice and get involved in the movement.

Lawson did. He ran workshops, teaching the philosophy and practice of nonviolence to teenagers who were ready to fight the system that oppressed them. He taught those like John Lewis how to literally turn the other cheek when they would receive physical blows at lunch counters and crossing the bridge in Selma.

Imagine being spit on. Hit. Kicked. Having slurs shouted at you. And finding within your spirit the strength to love. To pray for those who persecute you. To hope so fervently for a better future, that you could get up and do it again. To be so secure in your belovedness to God, that you could sing hymns of praise the morning after burning crosses peppered your yard.

That is living a spiritual life.

Lawson and other leaders of the Civil Rights Movement practiced prayer, singing together, and “centering down,” silent meditation. They practiced breathing, serving, reading Scripture, and mutual reliance.

There are many ways to abide, to get in step with the Spirit.

I think of the practice of Pope Francis each Maundy Thursday, washing the feet of people incarcerated. I think of one of my mentors who waits to respond to emails or comments or texts

that spark anger. He calls it a sacred pause. I think of our Taize practice, of those who walk the labyrinth and practice centering prayer, of the work of the Thursday men's group, of the many Bible studies and fellowship groups here— there are many ways to abide.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are slow growing drives of the spiritual life. Daily life grounded in God's love and secure in God's grace. They are the fruit that will heal the nations.¹

We are here, church, to show the world how to live a life connected to the Spirit that gives life.

We are here, individual followers of Christ, to live spiritual lives, grounded in love that transforms our daily reality and will transform world.

And when the dashboard lights are flashing, we are here to repent, to return to love that created us, freed us, and is transforming us.

Amen? Amen.

Charge and Benediction

¹ Revelation 22:2

I have a two-step charge for us this week. The first is to check your dashboard. What lights are flashing and what might they mean? What is untethering you from God's love and grace?

And step two is not to beat yourself up or to try to check off more "good Christian" to make up for it, but instead to wonder: How do I abide? What tethers my heart to God's love? And do it. Take a step to walk with the Spirit.

And know that in every step and misstep,

The love of God the Father,

The grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ,

And the companionship and guidance of the Holy Spirit,

Are with you, now and always, amen.



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