

The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity
Galatians 5:16-24: "Free to Be Fruitful."
September 12/13, 2020 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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O God, who delivered us from the power of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of Your dear Son, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, we earnestly ask You, enable us by Your grace, so to walk in the Spirit that we may not fulfill the lusts of the flesh, but bring forth the fruit of the Spirit, considering ourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (adapted from *The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 158)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the fifth chapter of St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. / Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. / But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who saved us and set us free to live for Him instead of for the destructive desires of our own flesh, dear fellow redeemed:

When we see people throw away great wealth or great opportunities or great abilities, it's hard for us to understand it. So maybe an elite athlete is dismissed from the team because of drug addiction. A gifted actor loses prime roles because of an abrasive personality. A brilliant student wastes away his days playing video games. A rich kid gets caught stealing. Things like these don't make sense to us. We think that if we had what they did, we wouldn't waste it.

But it's much easier to be an "armchair quarterback" than an actual one. It's easy to say what we would do differently when we haven't faced the things they have. As the account of the Good Samaritan taught us last week, when we see others experiencing difficulties, we should extend charity to them. We have room for charity toward others because we need their charity too.

If you want to talk about people who haven't maximized their opportunities or appreciated their blessings, aren't we at the top of that list? Let's consider what good things we have that so

few in the world even know about. We know that the God who created all things loves us. He is not angry with us because of our sins. He does not plot our punishment for our misdeeds. He sent His only Son to be our holy Substitute, to keep the Law perfectly for us, and to die in payment for our sins.

We know that Jesus rose again in victory over death. We know that the Holy Spirit works powerfully through the Word and Sacraments to comfort and heal and strengthen us. We know we are righteous in God's sight by faith in Jesus. We know He does not count our sins against us. We know that He works all things in our life—even the bad things—for good. We know that He guards and keeps us every moment of every day and will safely bring our souls to heaven when we die.

Most people in the world, including many who consider themselves religious, do not know God's love. They do not know He forgives them in Christ. They live in constant fear of His judgment. But you are free from those doubts and worries. You are free from the condemnation of the Law. You are free from the pressure of trying to appease God by your own works. You are free from the idea that how you live your life does not matter since you could never be good enough for God anyway. Your life does matter; Jesus gave up His life to save yours.

So what should you do with your life? How should you use the freedom you have in Christ? Some who have heard the Gospel of free forgiveness think that this gives them freedom to keep on sinning. "As long as I believe my sins are forgiven," they think, "then I can just go on doing what I want." But in today's text St. Paul has some cold water to throw on that idea. He writes that to use our freedom for sin will lead us back into spiritual slavery. Just because we once believed in Jesus does not mean we will always believe in Jesus. Saving faith can be lost.

Paul includes a long list of "*the works of the flesh.*" Many of the things he lists are considered acceptable in our modern society. Sex outside of marriage is okay, says the world, as long as it is consensual. Hoarding money and goods is fine as long as it is done legally. Anger and hatred are justified as long as the target is really terrible. Drunkenness and wild parties are okay as long as no one gets hurt. But no matter how we try to explain these sins away or make them acceptable to our conscience, they are offensive to God. Paul does not mince words, "*I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*"

So what hope do we have? We are guilty of committing many of these sins. But notice that Paul does not say, "those who have done such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." If that were the case, no one would be going to heaven. All of us have sinned. What Paul writes is, "*those who do such things.*" He is referring to those who willingly choose to sin and continue in it. They know what they are doing is contrary to God's Word, and they decide to go ahead with it anyway.

None of us is without sin, and we cannot keep ourselves from ever sinning. But we can stay on the lookout for temptations and pray for God's help to avoid sin. When we do fall into sin, God calls us to humble ourselves, to give up trying to justify our sins, and repent. But then He does not leave us under the condemnation of the holy Law. He leads us through the Gospel to Jesus' cross and empty tomb where we are assured that our sins are all forgiven.

Through the powerful Gospel, the Holy Spirit lifts the burden of our sins off us. We don't have to carry anymore what Jesus carried to the cross and paid for with His own blood. Now we are free. We are not weighed down anymore by the chains of sin and death and the crushing weight of the Law.

Those who carry an overwhelming load, whether from work or other responsibilities or committing to too many activities, don't feel free to help others in need. "I'm the one who needs help!" they think. In the same way, until the burden of our sin is removed, our focus remains on ourselves. Our energy is spent in piling up more sins, in trying to keep our past sins buried, or in doing whatever we can to quiet our guilty conscience. But when our spiritual burden is removed from us through the Gospel, we are free to focus on others. Now we forgiven sinners are ready to bear fruit.

Paul contrasts *"the works of the flesh"* done out of love for ourselves with *"the fruit of the Spirit"* done out of love for God and neighbor. We believers find the power and motivation to produce this fruit by hearing Jesus' Word and partaking of the Sacraments He instituted. *"I am the vine; you are the branches,"* He says, *"Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing"* (Joh. 15:5).

As long as we are connected to Him by faith, He promises to accomplish great things through us. He sends the Holy Spirit to produce in us *"love"* toward those around us, *"joy"* in our callings, *"peace"* from knowing His love, *"patience"* when difficulties come, *"kindness"* toward the hurting, *"goodness"* to the needy, *"faithfulness"* like the grateful Samaritan, *"gentleness"* toward oppressors and the oppressed, and *"self-control"* no matter the situation.

"The fruit of the Spirit" is wonderful fruit! It is fruit that brings blessings to our lives and the lives of those we meet. Paul writes that *"there is no law"* against these blessings. God wants us to have them. He wants us to drink deeply from the fountain of His Word where the Holy Spirit is always at work. And we must do this.

We must do this because *"the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other."* Our sinful nature and the Holy Spirit do not want the same thing. Our sinful nature wants to lead us along the path of self-centeredness and self-indulgence. This path heads directly toward hell. The Holy Spirit, on the other hand, wants us to have the good things of God: righteousness, comfort, peace, forgiveness, salvation, life. These gifts of Jesus keep us on the path toward heaven.

One way may look and feel like freedom, but fleshly freedom is slavery for the soul. The other way may seem like restriction and regulation, but suppression of our fleshly desires now is our only hope for life everlasting. Nobody has ever experienced true freedom by embracing the things of this world. If you remember the story of Pinocchio, the rowdy boys thought they had everything they could want on "Pleasure Island," but their bad behavior turned them into braying beasts locked in tiny cages.

True freedom is found in Jesus alone. It is a freedom from sin, not a freedom to sin. We are **Free to Be Fruitful**. We are free to move beyond the failures of our past. We are free to live God-pleasing lives that benefit our neighbors. We are free to pursue noble things that let us sleep

well at night. We are free to spend ourselves in service to Him who loves us with an undying love.

This freedom is yours not because of anything you did. It is because of what Jesus did for you. He was arrested, bound, and nailed to a cross so you would be free. He offered His holy life for your sinful one. He suffered in innocence so you would be spared of your guilt. Your Baptism joined you to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection (Rom. 6:4). It connected your life to His. It grafted you into the living Vine.

The baptized who remain in Him by faith are no longer ruled by the flesh. Paul writes that *"those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires."* So while you may have lost some battles to the flesh, Jesus has won the war. He has redeemed you from your sins and still grants you the blessing and the freedom to bear His fruit.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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