

“Led by the Spirit”
Romans 8:12-17; Galatians 5:16-26;
Luke 11:1-13

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We have been on this journey of looking at how we live a life of faith. It starts with a faith and a trust in God, a God that receives us unconditionally as he received the prodigal and as he received the eldest son. Then, as we recognize that we have a God in which we can trust, he brings us into a community of faith, the body of Christ. Part of that recognition of being in a body of Christ is recognizing that not only do we have God the Father, but we have Jesus, his son, and the Holy Spirit.

So as we, as a congregation, discerned our way forward together we thought about how we need to grow in the Spirit, how we need to recognize that as part of the family of faith that one way God is with us is through the Spirit. In fact, the way Jesus said God was going to be with us when he was no longer here with us in bodily form is to be there in the Spirit. So we began to think about what it means to embrace that Spirit, that one that we may not completely understand, that is transcendent, that is beyond us, that blows around as it will, and yet to embrace it.

One of the things about being in a relationship is taking time to have that conversation. One way we do that is praying and studying and involving ourselves in the activities and in the nature of what God is doing. Indeed, if we have a human friend and we want to maintain that friendship, we take time for it. We spend time together. So to maintain that relationship with God, there's this sense of taking time. In fact, Jesus seems to say we need to be persistent about it. In human friendships, they say that to be really deep friends, you need to spend at least 100 hours with someone before you can really create that depth of friendship. At least, that's what the research suggests. So we are invited to spend time. Jesus is talking about it as asking, searching, knocking—to take that time, to make the effort.

So often it feels to me like what we think about is that God will just do things to me, so I want to receive what God does. I want the Spirit to come over me. Which is interesting, because what Jesus seems to be saying here is, “You need to be really active about this. You need to participate. There's something to do.” It's not just sitting there and expecting God to come along and get our attention. It's perhaps taking time and opening ourselves to that relationship by spending some time in prayer and in study, and to recognize, then, what kind of relationship it is. Oftentimes when we spend time with friends, that's a valuable experience. The Spirit is in some ways a friend, a helper, a comforter with whom to spend time. In our scripture today, Paul is adding to the nature of our relationship to the Spirit. The Spirit leads us. However, in the second passage, this leading is described as living in the Spirit. There's a sense that there's a relationship that goes beyond just sitting down and having coffee with someone. Being led—that's an active verb. Living—that's an active verb. Those are two things we are invited to do in and with the Spirit, to be led and to live in the Spirit.

That's all fine and wonderful, but sometimes it's not easy. Sometimes we struggle to understand what we should do. When I was a child, my father tried to teach me how to do things well. I remember one time I was invited to go out and work in the garden on a particular task, and I went out and quickly (and poorly) did it. He came back and said, "I don't think so. You need to do this right." He sent me out to redo the task. As I grew up, I knew what my father had intended for me and how he had taught me what was right. I didn't always need my father to be present for me to know what my father wanted.

So often it feels to me like I am only going to be able to do what's right, and what's good, and what the Spirit has shown me when the Spirit is present. I think that's what Paul is talking about in Galatians. However, sometimes we don't feel spiritual. We don't feel the presence of the Spirit. In fact, it feels like God expects us not to feel special/spiritual all the time, but that doesn't mean we don't use what we've learned from the Spirit. I think that's what Paul, in Galatians, is talking about with the flesh and the spirit. The works of the flesh is to make decisions according to the self, and the fruits of the Spirit are what we have learned from the Spirit..

It's not that we're always going to sense the Spirit's presence. We do have other dynamics in our lives pressing on us. But we have to make decisions about how to do things, so God describes how we might live in the Spirit. It's not only Paul who talks about fruit. Jesus suggests in Matthew 7 that we will know a false prophet by its fruits. He also talks about how a good tree can't bear bad fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. There's a sense of discernment that comes with our walking through our life together.

It is really that distinction between being open to the work of God, letting ourselves be led, recognizing that we have, like Paul describing for us the way of the Spirit, the fruits of the Spirit, and the fruits of living according to the flesh. Think about those differences, the difference between the works of the flesh—they really are about how we deal with our desires and whether we simply do whatever we feel like is good and pleasurable at the moment. It's about us determining what is good and evil on our own. And what we know about that is a lot of things that are pleasurable at one moment have long-term effects that may not be so pleasurable. How do we deal with our emotions, our reactions, particularly our anger? How do we deal with divisions and strife?

It's quite a contrast, I think, if we look at the difference between the works of the flesh and the fruits of the Spirit. We can see the two different kinds of fruit. There's a big difference between love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, generosity and self-control, and the works of the flesh as described in Galatians 5:19-21. And, we're invited then to be discerning in our lives, to think about where something is false and when something is promulgated that doesn't live up to the fruits of the Spirit, but rather seem more like the works of the flesh.

When something is asking us to hate, when something is asking us to divide, when something is asking us to simply be angry, when something is working us up rather than helping us see a way forward, when something is asking us to be violent rather than

have love, joy, peace, patience and kindness, etc. in our lives, I think it's pretty obvious that the Spirit is missing. When we see what is going on in our world, we see people putting things out simply to divide us, to shape our world in a way that we are divided because we see things so differently, or to put things in people's minds that blame a particular group and we end up killing people like what happened on Friday at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. Somebody came to believe that the Jews are the problem. That's satanic to me. Sometimes it just feels like I don't know how to change it, what to do.

I love that in Romans Paul recognizes that we get to that point and there are times that we are invited simply to pray as best we can. At those moments where we reach the end of our rope and we don't know for sure what comes next, when we have struggles about our futures, our differences, or our pain we can bring it to God and let the Spirit pray with us with groans too deep for words and know and trust that God will take us on through life.

We are invited to be persistent, to continually come and recognize that God is with us, the Spirit is among us, that there is an invitation for us to keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking and recognize what those fruits are that God would have our lives exhibit. Even in those moments when we don't feel the Spirit's presence, we know where it is leading us. We know that Jesus showed us the way of servanthood and caring for one another. And really, the fruits of the Spirit are core examples of ways we do that.

We are invited to be a people and to recognize the good in the world, because when it's coming from the Spirit, it is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, generosity, and self-control, or things like that. I love at the end of each of those, Paul has this long string of things, and then it's "more things like that." We have a sense of what it's about. Sometimes I don't want to acknowledge it. Sometimes I don't want to admit it. I want to do my own thing. But we have pretty clear directions.

As we pray to God for the Spirit, he's not going to give us a scorpion. He's not going to give us something bad. He is going to give us the Holy Spirit. Through scripture we have seen the nature of what he is giving us, the very fruits of the Spirit. So we are invited to both discern the world around us by the good fruits and the bad fruits, and to discern the actions of our own lives and to live in the Spirit, led by the Spirit, so that we show the fruits of the Spirit. Amen.