

Sermon: Desires of Flesh and Fruits of Spirit**Scripture: Galatians 5:16-26****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: June 6, 2021**

Man, the pastor's wife laying down the law!

“Walk by the Spirit and do not gratify the desires of the flesh,” says the apostle Paul to an early Christian community who apparently despite their proximity in time to the Resurrection of Christ had their issues such that Paul had to encourage them towards love instead of hatred of one another, self-control instead of debauchery and orgies. Come on you all, he says, “walk by the Spirit and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.”

This little scriptural phrase has been interpreted problematically though as it seems to condemn all things body when in fact that is not what Paul meant. We've got to remember that Paul was a Jew not a Greek and for the Jewish world creation and the body was generated from God and pronounced good. It was only certain Greek philosophies that set up this dualism between immaterial spirit as good and holy and material body, earthly creation, as corrupt and unholy. Paul was weaned on the Genesis origin story where God created the earth and the human body and pronounced it good and worth saving, not bad and in need of being shed. And yet Paul makes such a proclamation about walking by the Spirit and not satisfying the desires of the flesh and it's easy to hear it as spirit is good, body is bad!

But for Paul “the Flesh” is not equivalent to the material body nor “the Spirit” equivalent to the immaterial personality or soul. Rather the distinction is between human life (body, spirit, personality, and soul) marked by love and

generativity and flourishing, which would be the human walking by Spirit contrasted with human life (body, spirit, personality, and soul) marked by hostility, decay, diminishment, and death (and all those examples that Tracy gave, which seem to emphasize sexual sinfulness). The desires of FLESH that Paul refers to is human embodied life distorted by sin which came into the world through Adam and Eve's turning away from God as the mythic story in Genesis describes it contrasted with the SPIRIT life which is the embodied life lived within the original intention of God which was revealed in Jesus Christ through his life, teachings, passion, death and resurrection.

So our bodies, our sexuality, and sex itself, despite what the church has seemed to suggest over the centuries is not a sinful dirty fleshy thing that was the result of our fall from grace, rather our bodies and our sexuality is an integral aspect of our God-created selves which, like all human existence, is marred by the sinful broken suffering nature of this world, but also can participate in the renewed, renewing and flourishing nature that God is bringing to be, through the Resurrected Christ in this world. Do you know what I mean here?

It can sound at times like abstract Christian theology, but as Paul is good at doing, it gets really practical and personal too, - many thought and still think - way too personal. But we all know the truth of what Paul is talking about, when sexuality is full of Spirit, meaning it's grounded in goodness and generates mutual honoring and care and uplift between ourselves and others and we know when sexual expression is harmful and violent and diminishing to ourselves and others. And Paul is trying to be crystal clear with his listeners about what their lives should look like under the influence of the Holy Spirit, contrasted with still being under the sway of the flesh as he calls it. And from then to the very present day,

it's one of the things that the church has struggled with; to name, support and encourage healthy human sexuality and to name and discourage unhealthy human sexuality. It's a fair and good and important thing to distinguish but it has caused problems too. And I'll just mention one since we are here in Pride month and are an Open and Affirming Congregation with a gay pride flag hanging from the front doors of our church.

The Christian Church has unfortunately fallen into another dualistic trap here where it has too simplistically conflated *sinful* human sexuality with sexual orientation and gender identity such that *healthy* human sexuality has been associated exclusively with the dominant, majority, group of power-holders in our society. This I would suggest really is more a matter of convenience than authentic Christian theology because it takes the focus off of how we ALL sin and fall short of the glory of God in our gendered sexual lives and it scapegoats a particular group of people as the problem, letting us off the normative dominant group off the hook. Shame on us. Christian theology makes clear and obvious that we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and it's exactly ALL of us that Christ died for. So c'mon, there are ways of being in heterosexual or homosexual relationships that fall into Paul's "flesh" categories, meaning they are marked by diminishment, violence, and alienation and there are ways of being in relationship with one another, homo or hetero, that is walking by the Spirit meaning it's mutually beneficial, life-enhancing, and generative. Likewise, the human being whether male, female, or nonbinary is marred by sin but also so loved by God that God was willing to die for that love. We all stand on that same ground – all of us sinners and all of us forgiven. All of us created physical beings fallen and weighted by how God's good creation has been distorted and all of us

invited to rise and walk by the Spirit in how God's good creation is being transformed through the risen Christ. Amen? Amen.

Ok so now that we've cleared that up, let's return to Paul's lists here and how he describes the fleshly sinful life and the Spirit-godly life and how we might lean into the Spirit-Godly life. I don't think many of us would take any issue with his categories.

"Let us walk by the Spirit and not gratify the desires of the flesh" which are sexual immorality and debauchery (that's a good word, isn't it, means excessive indulgence). It's idolatry (what are our idols these days that we tend to bow our knees to, more than God), sorcery (or you could say, be careful of the energy we send out to others that curses and does not bless them!). It's hatred, discord, jealousy and rage (yep, I think we are with Paul on these as being problematic). It's rivalries, divisions and factions (ohh, those are good ones for our day!). It's envy, drunkenness, orgies and the like (I don't know what "the like" is but we get the idea). It's those things that Paul says are the unredeemed desires of the flesh.

Then he lays out what kinds of qualities mark a human life walking by the Spirit. He says at the start of the list, these are the FRUITS of the Spirit which is a great analogy because when we plant trees and plants to get fruit, we don't make the fruit ourselves, we cultivate the garden to allow the fruit to come. So the question is not how to make these things happen in our lives but how do we cultivate the soil of ourselves so that these beautiful things arise and bloom in our lives? Love (of course love is the fruit of the Spirit), joy and peace (right, they can abide no matter our outward circumstances), patience (mmmm, hmmm, any of us been feeling impatient lately?) kindness and goodness (right, we could always use

more of these fruits in our lives), faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (agreed, all things the world could use more of these days).

Walk by the Spirit and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. But one thing that Paul would remind you that I want to end on and that is this - we are cultivating the garden of our souls and trying to weed out the weeds for the sake of our world and ourselves and to serve God in these ways. And God and the world needs us to work on walking by the Spirit and curbing the desires of the flesh. BUT let's be very clear – cultivating the fruit of the Spirit is not about EARNING God's love or jewels in our crown or access to heaven. God's love is freely and fully given to all of us forever even if we are full of envy and resentment and discord and live lives of debauchery and orgies. God loves us. And, the scandal of it all is, that God's love is not given any more to those who are filled with peace, joy, kindness and love. Such qualities simply have their own reward. God loves the haters and the lovers alike, the drunkards and the teetotalers, the petty and the gracious, the impure as well as the pure. And that love was offered forever more on the cross and spread out to the world from the empty tomb in the fleshly body of the resurrected Christ. Amen!