

“Working for the Good of All”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, July 3, 2016
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Readings from Scripture: Luke 10:1-11, 16-20 and Galatians 6:7-16

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’ But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.’

“Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.”

The seventy returned with joy, saying, “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!” He said to them, “I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.

Luke 10: 1-11, 16-20

Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand! It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised--only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh. May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! As for those who will follow this rule--peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.

Galatians 6:7-16

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open all of who we are to the power and mystery of your Spirit. We pray that the words from the Gospel of Luke and Paul’s letter to the Galatians would be infused with your Spirit, and that it would become the living word of Jesus Christ for each of us and for our community. I pray that your Spirit would do the necessary work this day within our hearts and souls and minds, so that we might be more faithful to you and to the call and invitation of the Gospel that you give to each of us. I pray also that when I speak, the message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the Gospel of Christ our Lord in whose name we pray. Amen.

May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. The last proclamation, if you will, of the apostle Paul who says that God is not deceived, God is not mocked, you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to the flesh you will reap corruption and if you sow to the Spirit you will reap eternal life. Brothers and sisters to what do you sow? To the flesh? Be damned. To the Spirit? Ah, life. Every time I have ever heard this passage, I feel like the laser beam of God is directed straight at my heart and soul, and that Paul is accusing me of reaping to the flesh and sowing corruption and that I need to get my act together in order to be a better human being. And man, I wish he was saying that because I could get some serious leverage from all of you if that were true. We need some money to fix the air conditioning units--you may have read the newsletter. You better sow to the Spirit with that check you're gonna write 'cause otherwise it might get hot in here. You better clean up your act because someone might find out about you and your reputation will be destroyed. You better get it all figured out, otherwise you're not a good Christian.

Anybody else ever hear that story like that? That it's all about you getting your stuff together, because if you sow to the flesh there is corruption and if you sow to the Spirit, then there's life and peace and love and joy. Paul says those things so clearly and so diametrically opposed to each other because of his own experience. When he says, "May I never boast of anything but the cross of Jesus Christ," he is talking about his experience of persecuting Christians, having a conversion experience on the road to Damascus and becoming a different person afterwards. An ambassador for Christ, a carrier of the Gospel, an evangelist to all the Gentiles. The one who was persecuting the followers of Christ--ZAP--is now the main evangelist. And he says, "May I boast of nothing but the cross of Jesus Christ. The world has been crucified to me and I to the world and now I am a new creation."

All week long what I've been wondering about or feeling--not wondering about because it's pretty clear--I've been really upset and angry at Paul, because he says we are not supposed to boast in anything but the cross of Christ and yet he is boasting about his experience of encountering the living God and having his life transformed. When he talks about how the world has been crucified to me and I to the world and now there is new creation and I'm it--you don't read that part but essentially that is what he is saying. And he is lifting himself up as an example to everyone. I'm thinking to myself, "no, no, no. Don't do that. Don't end this letter with the bar so high that none of us who follow Jesus Christ feel like we can make it or reach it." And then I remembered that Paul wrote some other letters. He wrote one to the Ephesians. You can't see it now because the cross is in the way-- "By grace are you saved through faith, and this is not of your own doing but it is the gift of God so that no one may boast."

So all week I've been wondering, which is it? Are we to boast about the cross or are we not to boast? What I realized is that Paul in this letter to the Galatians is so angry at them, that he doesn't realize that his anger continues to spill over and color what he is trying to present to them, which is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And I thought to myself, "Thanks be to God for that." That it's okay to be angry. Sometimes we are not aware of it. Sometimes it colors what we do and sometimes that's even good enough to be put into the Bible.

The other thing that I remembered is that Paul did write a bunch of letters to churches. Paul never wrote a letter to me and he never wrote a letter to you. Because of a weird shift in our grammar in English, we mis-hear what Paul is writing. Paul is not talking to you individually when he says, "If you sow to the flesh you will reap corruption, and if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap life and joy and peace." No he is not talking to you, the individual. Paul is talking to a community of faith, he is talking to us as an entire people, as a church, and he is saying to us, the church, in Galatia and us here in Kirkwood, "Do not advocate for your own self-interests, otherwise you will create ruin, destruction, degradation, division, fissure in the community of faith. Instead, all of you, sow to the Spirit, work to the common good. Do the right thing amongst each other and with those you meet out there in the world and goodness will emerge, and love and peace will occur. And for me, it changes when I think it's not directed straight at me but it's to all of us. Because I realize it's easier to absorb such a clear message of sowing to the flesh or sowing to the Spirit,

because every now and then some of us are going to sow to the flesh and some of us are going to sow to the Spirit, but collectively if we're more towards the Spirit side than the flesh side, we're okay. And if we're tipping that way, towards the Spirit side, if we as a community of faith are sowing acts of kindness and goodness and peacefulness in our world, God is at work through us. And then Paul admonishes us or invites us or encourages us to keep at it, to persevere doing good, don't stop. No matter what--keep going.

As many of you know, I have been encased in plastic from my belt to my neckline for the last 2.85 months. A week from tomorrow this baby is going bye-bye. (applause) But I learned a lesson when I was in the hospital on perseverance because I kept wondering if I push that button one more time, will they come in and tell me off. And they never did. "I need the sheet on. I'm too cold. I need the sheet off. This machine's beeping. I'm hungry. I need to get up. I need to roll over." Keep pushing the button and people keep showing up and they keep saying, "How can I help you, David?" Keep at it. Keep doing good things. That's our job. Keep doing the good thing. Do the next good thing. When you're ready to strangle your ch---- Oh, I shouldn't say this out loud--because you have given them the same advice ten times and they still haven't taken it, give it an 11th time. And a 12th and a 13th and a 14th and a 15th and a 16th--and just keep doing the right thing. Don't stop. Don't give up.

It's not easy. But that's what Paul is trying to get us to realize. That collectively we embody the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Spirit lives within us and among us and so when we hear these words in Scripture, often we need to realize that they are not directed at me or you but at us. Within that you can find space and freedom to hear the word differently. To realize that God is okay with who you are and wants you to become even more like Christ. It's both-and. Personally I wish that we would get over any kind of boasting, be it the cross or self achievement--I don't think any of that belongs in the community of faith. We are saved by grace and this is God's gift to us. Amen.