

Rev. Jim Poinsett
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
“Creating Community for All of God’s People”
Sunday, August 1, 2021

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

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

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 slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. 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. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, 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.

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

Luke 9:51-62

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set towards Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, ‘Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?’ But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, ‘I will follow you wherever you go.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.’ To another he said, ‘Follow me.’ But he said, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.’ Another said, ‘I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.’ Jesus said to him, ‘No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.’

I invite you to pray with me. Startle us with your truth, Oh, God. Open our hearts and minds to your word this morning. Fill us with your spirit so that we might go from this place, set about to do the work of the gospel and to proclaim your kingdom and follow us faithful disciples of Jesus Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.

It is a pleasure to be here with you this morning. I bring greetings from the Interfaith Partnership of Greater St. Louis, a collaborative organization of over 30 religious and ethical communities in the metropolitan area. Interfaith St. Louis provides platforms for diverse religious voices to be heard and promotes interfaith cooperation through understanding, engagement,

and advocacy. I've been the executive director of Interfaith St. Louis since November of 2019. And let's just say my first 20 months have been, well, remarkable. A global pandemic, restriction and separation, a renewed focus on racial equity, political polarization. I'm sure that you will also agree that these times have tested both our courage and our capacity. And it seems that they will continue to do so for some time. But I have been heartened by seeing the ways that First Pres and other religious communities in our area have overcome the challenges of isolation and fear, providing space to reflect, grieve, and process important events, advocating for human dignity, building a more resilient community.

I want to share with you more on what Interfaith St. Louis does in a moment. But for me, the first word should always be one of gratitude. And I wish to share my gratitude for this congregation. I am grateful for the invitation from Reverend Smutz and the Session to be with you here today to tell you a little bit more about Interfaith St. Louis. And I want to give thanks to Kirkwood Presbyterian Church for all the ways that they support the work of the Interfaith Partnership. First Pres has been a financial supporter of Interfaith St. Louis since 2006. And I have been colleagues with the ministers here since my time coming to St. Louis in 2015. I'm also grateful for the Presbytery-Giddings-Lovejoy and their deep commitment to interfaith dialogue.

Also today, I might add, that I wish to also share my great gratitude for this congregation's reopening task force, which made it possible for us to gather in person today. I was originally supposed to be with you on March 22nd, 2020. But we all know what happened then. So, this day has been a long time coming, and I'm thrilled to be a part of you and thanks in part to the task force works. It's no accident that the middle name of that group is task because it's an unenviable task as we try to deal with all the changing things. And thank you for being partners in the Interfaith Partnership's effort to increase vaccination and get past this pandemic so we can all continue to gather together.

Thank you. First Pres Kirkwood for all the ways that you partner and invest in Interfaith St. Louis, enabling the critical bridge-building and community building work that we do my own involvement in interfaith work has been quite a journey. See, I am a second career clergy person. My previous vocation was Washington, DC lobbyist, working for Big Tobacco. Way back then, I had no idea that interfaith work was even a thing. While I was in Washington, I began wrestling with some of the moral and ethical implications of what I was doing. Then, on September 11th, 2001, terrorists attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. From my K Street office, I could see the smoke rising from the Pentagon. At that moment, I knew it was time for me to do something different with my life, but I was unsure what that would be. I felt God calling me to a theological education to help reframe who I was and what I was doing. I was led to Yale Divinity School in New Haven, Connecticut, and it was there where I met my now late wife, Robin.

We decided that we were going to build a life together, but she had this one caveat. She said, "We can live wherever you like, as long as it's in Connecticut." Now, look, I loved Robin, and I was happy to live in Connecticut, but it left me with a bit of a quandary. What was I supposed to do now? How was I going to spend my time? What am I going to do with this fancy degree that I've just gotten from Yale? When I went to divinity school, I had no intention of ever becoming a minister. My idea was to go back to DC and work in nonprofit advocacy, do something better for the world and keeping it safe for Joe Camel to sell his wares. But you know the line about we have plans and God, well, laughs. So, I stayed in Connecticut. I met Robin because she was a lecturer in the Political Science department at Yale. Her field was international relations.

She was at the divinity school doing research because she wanted to know more about how religion impacted international affairs. Remember the context; this was just a couple of years after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11th. It's hard to believe that we're coming up on the 20th anniversary on that now. I'm sure many of you recall how traumatizing that event was, and it was a traumatizing event for Robin because she was a 9/11 widow. In her grief, Robin had this deep longing to know how this type of violence, which directly affected her, could have been done in God's name.

Those of you who were around at the time might have found yourself thinking those very same things. I know I was. I was also perplexed. That confusion and curiosity led me to parish ministry, not only because I wanted to be employed, but I wanted to use that ministry to come alongside Robin and her work, and so also, I could have a better understanding of how people can claim an allegiance to God, but still do violence in God's name.

Through my ministry, I became involved with the New York State Council of Churches, and then, after Robin died, Interfaith Philadelphia, and that eventually led me here. The more I learned, the more I discovered the violence that happens in God's name does not just happen in explosive, dramatic events it doesn't just happen on the things that we see on TV or in far-off countries, although it does. It also happens in our local communities in poignant, insidious ways. We see examples of this all around us. There are violent acts against people and communities of faith. Recent shootings this spring have targeted religious minorities like Muslims and Sikhs. And houses of worship and sacred sites have been vandalized and desecrated. There are incidents of scapegoating or rumor-mongering, acts of anti-Semitism, and xenophobia towards Asian and Pacific Islanders. People are on the rise even in our own community. It happens in our civic discourse, which is becoming more polluted. And as we become more polarized, the use of Christian symbols crosses, and Jesus saves banners was more than prevalent in the insurrection on the US Capitol in January. And those symbols continue to be used to justify views, stoke fear, and provoke violence.

And lest we distance ourselves from these kinds of actions, Christian triumphalism can be its own form of violence. It is a subtle and short step from rejoicing in the good news of Jesus to attacking those who will not share in it to show how others are wrong, misguided, even unfaithful. We find ourselves in a time when calling down fire from heaven on those who are different from us seems to find a favor. It is a time that when fear drives us inward with a desire to stay close to people who are like us all of which seems to contradict Jesus's example and today's reading from Luke's gospel. As you heard Jesus and his disciples enter a Samaritan town, the townspeople reject Jesus sending him away. Jesus's disciples want to call down fire from heaven. They seem eager to punish the Samaritans for their refusal to receive Jesus. And Jesus will have none of it. Jesus's answer is to rebuke his disciples, then he instructs them to get on with the work of the gospel. He does this to distinguish his way of leading. He wants to show those who follow him what it costs to work in his way.

Jesus begins his lesson by refusing to retaliate against the Samaritan Village. And then when his disciples want to finger point, Jesus instead requires them to examine their own life commitments. Jesus then goes on to challenge his would-be followers to risk living an uprooted life. He challenges them to live a life committed to all God's people, not just the people we would call family. He invites people to think outside of their narrow, familiar framework. He calls his followers to recognize a new loyalty, a loyalty that goes deeper than even family relationships. Jesus calls for a loyalty that identifies with God's purposes to welcome the stranger and those on the margin. Jesus expects his followers to build a kingdom where divisions are reconciled, where mercy, not retaliation, has the last word. That is the freedom that Christ came to give us. Christ invites us to walk in the pure bright light of freedom as children of God. It is through that freedom guided by the Spirit that enables us to find honor and reaching out beyond our familiar connections, to create communities where all feel valued and empowered. I've lived in St. Louis now about almost six years. I know that's a very short time by St. Louis standards. But I've been listening and I've been learning. It seems in many ways that we are divided. We're divided by the Mississippi River. We're divided in the city and county. We are separated by the Delmar Divide. You know the list. It goes on and on. What we strive to do at the Interfaith Partnership is to bridge those divisions, to bring unity, to make ours a community that can flourish, that can live together, that can be neighbors with and for one another. We believe that the only way that we can overcome the violence caused by our divisions, even the violence done in God's name, is to build relationships with one another. When we get to know one another and learn from one another, no matter how we name the Holy One, we can see that we are all God's children. We can recognize one another as neighbor. And dare I even say it - this is the dream - to even love one another. That is an audacious goal, but it is the goal of Interfaith Partnership of Greater St. Louis.

It is true that religion has played a crucial role in promoting conflict and polarization. Yet, I believe that religious communities are an essential part of bridging the current social and political divides. I believe that bridging divides rather than making them deeper, and we can do that by locating this bridge building in a larger sense of civic engagement and community. During the past year, communities of faith and conscience that are part of the Interfaith Partnership have gone about this bridge building in amazing and inspiring ways, offering steady connection at a time of social distancing, such as our Sprouts of Peace program. Providing families with digital learning and engagement tools so that they can continue building interfaith relationships with one another, meeting moral obligations for loving our neighbors, such as the [sects?] of St. Louis, the Islamic Foundation of St. Louis, and area Christian churches and Jewish synagogues working to provide food and vaccinations in vulnerable neighborhoods, holding hope in the face of despair, faith leaders and their congregants from different traditions coming together to offer support and lifting the concerns and hopes of those in our community ravaged by shootings and violence. Those are just some of the examples of the important bridge-building work that we are doing.

For those of us in Christian communities, in times like this, we need to be reminded of Christ's promise that nothing will ever separate us from the love of our Creator. In Galatians, which Ellen read for us earlier, St. Paul reminds us that we are called to freedom. "Through love, become slaves to one another," Paul writes. "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment: you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Friends, the good news is this: Christ has poured out his Spirit on us, giving us the gifts that we need to get on with the work of the gospel and to go and proclaim the kingdom of God. We are to follow Christ, the one who leads through understanding rather than vengeance, mercy rather than retaliation, reconciliation rather than violence. We are to be guided by the Spirit that has freed us for the agenda, as Paul states it, of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness. Christian freedom is not a freedom from, but rather, the freedom that we receive in Christ is a freedom for. We are free. We are free and empowered. We are free to work for justice and reconciliation. We are free for building relationships, bridging divisions, and finding unity among differences. We are free for creating a community that can flourish where we can live together and be neighbors with and for one another. Spiritually, we become the people God calls us to be when we learn to love and serve.

From all the way back in 2001 to 20 years later here in 2021, there are constant reminders that the world is a fractured place. One only need to look to the pandemic-spawned upheaval and the near constant vitriol and anger that permeates our days to see how fragile our community really is. When people of faith from different backgrounds and traditions get to know one another, their community is stronger, they experience less prejudice and bigotry, and they're more resilient. I am confident in the unique ability of St. Louis faith communities such as First Pres Kirkwood to build powerful relationships through collaboration and cooperation, to overcome polarity and fear with understanding. This is the time when we all need to be involved. Together we will help bolster our fragile community and mend this fractured world by showing love and respect for one another. Together we can build a more thriving and stronger community where everyone feels valued and has a role to play. Together we can create a better St. Louis full of peace and understanding, more kind, more compassionate, more generous, more just. May it be so. Amen.