

## **“Live by the Spirit”**

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**

**Sunday, June 26, 2016  
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Readings from Scripture: Luke 9:51-62 and Galatians 5:1, 13-25**

*When the days drew near for Jesus 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 toward 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 plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”*

*Luke 9:51-62*

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

*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 neighbor 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.*

*Galatians 5:1, 13-25*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts and our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your swirling Spirit. May that Spirit of Truth live within us. May it build bridges between us and may it empower us to go forth into this world to live out the Gospel, the goodness of God offered to all through Jesus Christ. May that Spirit bless our hearing of your sacred scriptures and may it bless this sermon and these words that you have laid upon my heart this morning to share. And may your Spirit guide each of us in our desires to be faithful in all that we do and in all that we say and in all that we

hold within. We ask this through the faithfulness of Christ who is our Lord, who loves us, forgives us and sets us free now and forever. Amen.

I did not grow up in the church. I was agnostic or worse for most of my early years and it wasn't until I had a conversion experience in college that I began to realize that there was a God, that God had interest in me and that God wanted something to do with me. I wasn't sure what it was, but I trusted in the experience that I had and was, for a short time, convinced that I needed to become a Jesuit priest, to commit my life to education and to service and to changing the world and serving the poor. I didn't realize that you had to be Catholic longer than 10 minutes to become a Jesuit priest, and as my wife would attest, there were a few other rules that I didn't fully comprehend at the time. But one thing I did was I fell in love with the Bible and I read scripture again and again. I came across passages like this one in Galatians where it seems that Paul is laying out such an obvious split between the desires of the flesh and life in the Spirit and that you're either one or the other. You either are a heathen, as was the language of my day, where you gratified only the desires of the flesh--fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, envy, drunkenness, passions, carousing and every other thing I did in college--things like these. Uh-oh.

I can remember praying time and again that the Spirit of God would come and take all of that from me, and that in an instant I would be transformed from a self-centered jerk who was only out for himself and his pleasure and desire. In an instant I wanted to become someone full of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness--oh Lord help us all--and self control. I kept looking for the magic pill or the golden ticket, or the wand that someone would cast over me and Shazam! I am now a good person instead of what I've known myself to be. But now many years and a few decades later, I realize that the work of the Spirit is not magic. That while there have been moments of insight or moments of healing or moments of recognition, for the most part the work of the Spirit unfolds in our lives as we continue to trip and stumble our way towards becoming that which God intends us to be--people created in the image of Jesus Christ. I wish there was some magic elixir that I could give to each of you where you could instantly be transformed into a people who are loving and joyful and peaceful and patient and on and on. I wish even that this table with bread and cup would be that place where we could come and be -- Shazam! -- transformed and have, again, all of our shortcomings laid aside.

But the Spirit of God takes a longer view, in my opinion. And what Paul sets up as a black or white, yes or no kind of distinction, I do not find lived out in life as you and I experience it. Instead we have to make decisions and we have to discern whether or not the Spirit is moving us one way or the other. As Paul says at the end of this passage, *if we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit*. There are times where we need to breathe and to make a decision and to figure out which way to go and there is not a clear left or right, yes or no. But instead we need to hold that middle space and wait for God's wisdom to emerge.

I may have shared this story a couple of weeks ago, but it is worth sharing again, because to me it captures the essence of what it means at times to live by the Spirit. Like a crazed lunatic I ran out of my office. I went and stood between Fran and Paula and I said, "Oh my gosh, I have a conundrum! I don't know whether I should do this spiritual direction continuing education or if I should do the Soul of the Leadership education. One of them is Sunday to Sunday and it sounds magnificent, four weeks over the course of the next year and a half in New Mexico. The other one four weeks in Boston but not over two Sundays which makes more sense. I don't know which one to go to. Should I jump left or should I jump right?" And Fran, without missing a beat, said, "Don't jump." And in an instant I knew she was right. I was to do neither. And instead what I proposed for my continuing education was to do an independent study where I would spend four weeks in different retreat centers guided by my own spiritual director and scheduled according to the rhythms of this congregation. When I bowed to her and said, "Ah. Thank you, Sansei." Fran said, "No. You're just wearing that brace thing. Don't jump." She thought she was being practical, but I heard the Holy Spirit speaking through her, clear and precise. Sometime it's not this or that

but it's something in between. It's not flesh or spirit, chaos or perfection, but sometimes, maybe all the times, we live in this in between place.

I was reminded of this desire to have a Shazam! moment yesterday when I was reading a New York Times website article called, "A Born-Again Donald Trump? Believe it, evangelical leader says." The article begins, "Has Donald J. Trump become a born-again Christian? That is the suggestion of James Dobson, one of America's leading evangelicals who said that Mr. Trump had recently come to accept a relationship with Christ and was now a baby Christian. This is Donald Trump who was born Presbyterian. Dr. Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family and one of the country's most prominent social conservatives, gave his account at a meeting that Mr. Trump had in New York on Tuesday with hundreds of Christian conservatives. In an interview recorded at the event by a Pennsylvania pastor, Dr. Dobson said he knew the person who led Mr. Trump to Christ, though he did not name him. 'I don't know when it was but it has not been long,' Dobson said, 'I believe he (Trump) really made a commitment but he is a baby Christian.'" Later in the article it says that for evangelicals, "accepting Christ" is at the heart of becoming a genuine Christian and refers to acknowledging sin and declaring the need for Jesus Christ as Savior.

Kedron Bardwell, a political science professor at Simpson College in Iowa and the son of an evangelical pastor, is quoted as saying, "The expectation evangelicals have is of a radical change, a 180 degree turn from a life of sin to follow Christ." Shazam! The magic pill. The golden ticket. A confession of sin and acceptance of Jesus, and everything will change. But it doesn't, does it? For many of us have accepted Christ and weekly we confess our sins and still we do not have that sense of being beyond the desires of our flesh and committed to the life that Paul is talking about. I share this story about the evangelicals putting their stamp of approval on Trump because of that quote about a 180 degree turn, that somehow Donald Trump in one moment would be changed, that somehow you and I in one utterance would be changed. Maybe you've had an experience like that, but for most of us it doesn't happen where we are completely transformed. There are moments where we have flashes of insight and awareness where we are sure that God loves us. But to learn to be a follower of Christ takes a lifetime. To learn to lay aside the desires of the flesh for us to embrace the freedom that is given takes a lifetime. To realize that the freedom that we have in Christ is not so that we can do whatever we want, but so that we might love our neighbors as ourselves. Learning that and putting that into practice takes a lifetime.

To that end I'd like to share a story that my friend, Bill Harkins, an episcopal priest and professor at Columbia Seminary tells about a friend of his. "A dear friend and colleague recently died after a courageous year-long battle with leukemia. A priest for more than 40 years, he came to the cathedral where we both were associates in a part-time capacity. His retirement afforded him the ability to focus on those areas of ministry he most deeply loved, contemplative prayer, spiritual formation and liturgy. He was a wise and gentle mentor to those of us who were younger in priest years, and a gift in so many ways to the parish. After numerous hospitalizations, second and third opinions, two extensive rounds of chemotherapy and a joyful but short-lived remission, the cancer returned with a new vigor and intensity. In consultation with his family, my colleague made the decision to cease all the palliative care and to die on his own life-giving terms. In one of our last conversations he said, 'I've had so much love.' 'Yes,' I replied, "there are so many who loved you and are grateful for you.' 'That may be,' he replied, 'but what I mean is that there are so many whom I have loved. I have so much gratitude for the love God has enabled me to give away.' We were quiet for a few minutes, then he said, 'Having made the decision not to continue with treatment has freed me to focus on quality rather than on longevity. It has given me the freedom to see in a new way how much love there has been, is now and will be. Love is meant to be given away. That is what the incarnation is all about.' We sat together in silence in the early spring sun on his back deck with the birds feasting at his bird feeder. A few days later he was gone." 1

Love is meant to be given away. That is what the incarnation is all about. In today's passage Paul talks about the freedom that is ours in Jesus Christ and that the greatest commandment that that freedom

empowers us to embrace is the commandment that you shall love your neighbor as yourself. Indeed, love is meant to be given away. Amen.

1 "Feasting on the Word", William Harkins