

The Fruitful Season

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Whitefish UMC

June 27, 2010

- † Whatever you do, don't try to schedule a church Finance Committee meeting on Tuesday evening. Why? Because most of the members will be cruising the north end of Central Avenue in Whitefish at the Farmer's Market. When we suggested Tuesday night for a meeting to assess the church's financial situation, the Farmer's Market won the contest hands down.
- † If you visit the farmer's market here or anywhere in our part of the world these days, it's easy to see that we have entered our most fruitful season. With the arrival of the summer solstice, it's officially the season of ripening strawberries and salad greens, of cherries growing in abundance, and grain growing lush in the fields. What a time for rejoicing in God's abundance bursting forth from creation! This week 21 pounds of salad greens were taken to the Food Bank from our community garden just outside our church doors!
- † This is also the season on the church calendar when we rejoice in the fruits of God's grace flowing in and through our lives, just as Paul says in today's lesson from Galatians. It is also the season when we focus on John Wesley, our Methodist forefather's, stewardship call to be fruitful: to "gain all you can" for the building up of God's kingdom of abundant life for all.

† Today's sermon is about love and money and freedom. But don't turn your listening ears and hearts off. For one of our congregation's most loving, generous, and liberty-loving family has given me this joke for today:

† The Twenty and the One

A well-worn one-dollar bill and a similarly distressed twenty-dollar bill arrived at a Federal Reserve Bank to be retired.

As they moved along the conveyor belt to be burned, they struck up a conversation.

The twenty-dollar bill reminisced about its travels all over the country.

"I've had a pretty good life," the twenty proclaimed. "Why I've been to Las Vegas and Atlantic City, the finest restaurants in New York, performances on Broadway, and even a cruise to the Caribbean."

"Wow!" said the one-dollar bill. "You've really had an exciting life!"

"So tell me," says the twenty, "where have you been throughout your lifetime?"

The one dollar bill replies, "Oh, I've been to the Methodist Church, the Baptist Church, and the Lutheran Church."

The twenty-dollar bill interrupts, "What's a church?"

† If I were going to give that ignorant twenty-dollar bill an answer, I'd say that a church is where people freed from fear and self-obsession give their love and their money away to God and their neighbors.

† One young woman who served as a chaplain in Yellowstone National Park describes the fruitfulness that results from freedom in Christ like this:

"Fruitfulness is what happens when we reach out with hope, courage, and confidence from the anchored place of Christ's love and acceptance.

† Fruitfulness allows you to be fully present to the moment. Fruitfulness is activity deeply rooted in the soil of God's grace. Fruitfulness is, as Henri

Nouwen says, ‘The realization that I am worth more than the sum total of all my efforts.’ Fruitfulness is enabled by a fundamental trust that it is the Holy Spirit, who is working at all times and in all places, at play in us—busy or not.”

† Two monks were on their travels. One of them practiced the spirituality of acquisition; the other believed in renunciation, of giving things up and giving them away. All day long they discussed their respective spiritualities, till toward evening they came to the bank of a river. Now the believer in renunciation had no money with him. He said, “We cannot pay the boatman to take us across, but why bother about the body. We shall spend a night here chanting God’s praises, and tomorrow we’re sure to find some kind soul who will pay our passage.” The other said, “There’s no village on this side of the river, no hamlet, no hut, no shelter. We shall be devoured by wild beasts or bitten by snakes or killed by the cold. On the other side of the river we shall be able to spend the night in safety and comfort. I have the money to pay the boatman.” Once they were safely on the other bank, he remonstrated with his companion, “Do you see the value of keeping money? I was able to save your life and mine. What would have happened to us if I had been a man of renunciation like you?” The other replied, “It was your renunciation that brought us across to safety. For you did part with your money to pay the boatman, didn’t you? Moreover, I had no money in my pocket, but your pocket became mine.”

† Now most of us will never practice completely either the spirituality of acquisition or renunciation. We are here in church this summer morning because we practice a bit of both. And so we ask, “What are the fruits that God is growing within and through your life? And what are the new fruits

that God's grace is bearing within and through our church? And how are we doing at sharing these ripening fruits of the Spirit?

- † Henri Nouwen, again, writes: “The fruit of the Spirit of God—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness, and self-control cannot be limited to interpersonal relationships. They have dimensions far exceeding the small circles of friends, family, or even community. They carry in themselves a worldwide dynamic that we call mission.”
- † It's no accident that the first fruit of the spirit is love. Everything else flows from it. But as the sweet song goes, “Love isn't love till you give it away.” One writer tells of a dear friend and colleagues who died after a courageous, long struggle with leukemia. A priest for more than forty years, he came to the cathedral where they were both associates. He was a mentor to younger priests, and everyone prayed for him to recover fully. After a brief remission, his cancer returned with a vengeance.
- † And after consultation and prayer, the priest decided to cease all but comfort care and to die on his own terms. In one of their last conversations, he said, “I have had so much love.” “Yes,” his friend replied, “there are so many who love 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. My decision 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 (the coming of God in the humanity of Jesus) is all about.”

- † The two priests sat together in silence, in the early spring sun, on his back deck, with the goldfinches and the nuthatches feasting at this birdfeeder. A few days later, the elder priest was gone.
- † In the next week, our community will be preparing for the fourth of July—Independence Day. The firework stands are already sprouting, and red, white, and blue decorations are in all the stores. We will celebrate the freedom established in the birth of our nation.
- † But the kind of freedom that Paul is talking about in the scripture today is of a different nature. For in these verses Paul is saying unequivocally that freedom is *for love*. Apparently the young Christians in Galatia were fighting amongst themselves and their infighting was an outward and visible sign of an ongoing enslavement. In their case, they were worried about whether new converts, Gentiles, had to submit to circumcision—thus Paul’s warnings about focusing too much on the addictions of the flesh.
- † What was supposed to be life-giving had become a cause for stumbling and breaking apart. The Galatians were allowing these debates to take precedence over the law of loving one’s neighbor as oneself.
- † To be sure, our church isn’t engaging in debates about circumcision—at least I am not aware of any. Right now anyway, the main controversy is over what time we should have worship during the summer. And I love the fact that our church is willing to try something new that meets the needs of our younger families and those who like to get out into the beauty of the outdoors earlier in the day.
- † But the hard truth is that so far, our attendance is down considerably—half of what it was the last time we had church at 10:15. The jury is still out, though. But when our attendance goes down, so does our financial giving.

We don't have much in reserve, and giving was already lower than last year's at this time.

† It is my firm belief that you are a congregation who wants to give your love away. And sometimes that love takes the form of money. This week we will welcome over a hundred children from our community to Vacation Bible School. We charge a small fee that only begins to cover the financial cost. I know you want to continue to offer this gift of love and learning to the children. The grass will be watered, the lawn mowed, the air-conditioning run with electricity, copies will be made, and salaries will be paid—but not without your help—not just today but over the next months.

† John Wesley commented on today's scripture passage with these words: "Let us, sisters and brothers, be stewards of life!" He believed in the freedom to earn all one can without hurting our neighbor, to save all that we can without being miserly, and give all you can. He wrote these words that we used to sing as our doxology at our church in Helena:

† *Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can—as long as ever you can.*

† God calls us to be fruitful in our freedom—with our love and our money—in this season of fruitfulness. The next time you visit the Farmer's Market and revel in the abundant gifts of this season, save a little so that you can give love away for God's kingdom.

† Let's close with the words to this beautiful new hymn by Shirley Erena Murray:

† "Take my gifts and let me love you
God who first of all loved me,
gave me light and food and shelter

gave me life and set me free,
now because your love has touched me
I have love to give away,
now the bread of love is rising loaves of love to multiply.

† "Take the fruit that I have gathered
from the tree your Spirit sowed,
harvest of your own compassion
juice that makes the wine of God
spiced with humor, laced with laughter
flavor of the Jesus life,
tang of risk and new adventure taste and zest beyond belief.

† "Take whatever I can offer
gifts that I have yet to find,
skills that I am slow to sharpen,
talents of the hand and mind,
things made beautiful for others
in the place where I must be:
take my gifts and let me love you,
God who first of all loved me."

† Amen.

Sources:

Calum MacLeod, "Freedom Songs," <http://fourthchurch.org>

Tanya Barrett and Tom Wilson, "Living in God's Grace," weekly stewardship
email from Northwest United Methodist Foundation

J. William Harkins, "Pastoral Perspective" in Feasting on the Word.