

God's Secret Mission

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Epistle Lesson: Galatians 5:16-26

Gospel Lesson: Matthew 7: 12-20

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My wife, Debbie, was standing in line at a Federal Express store having some photocopies made one day. The woman in line front of Debbie was unhappy with the service from the staff. Instead of simply complaining, however, the woman began ranting loudly at the Fed-Ex employees in the most vile, disrespectful and demeaning manner you can imagine. The woman shouted at them. She harangued them. She called them stupid and lazy. She did everything in her power to humiliate them.

All the while, the poor employees stood there in silence, shocked and stunned and embarrassed by the vulgarity and verbal violence of the woman's attack.

As she wound up her assault on the employees, the woman said, "We don't have to be politically correct anymore. And you can't make me."

Debbie leaned forward and said to the woman, "What you said didn't have anything to do with political correctness, it just showed a lack of manners and upbringing."

When Debbie came home later, she said to me, "I think my grandmother would have been proud of me today."

I think Debbie's grandmother would have been proud of how well her granddaughter had paid attention to her when it came to good manners, and how well she listened in Sunday School. "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets," said Jesus. Now, there's no way to know if the woman who vented her anger at those employees was a Christian, although it is statistically likely that she might have been. But, whatever her faith, if any, might have been, the equivalent of the Golden Rule is found in every major religion in the world, from Zoroastrianism to Taoism, from Judaism to Hinduism, from the ancient Code of Hammurabi (which predates the Ten Commandments) to modern day Unitarian Universalism.

Sadly, however, there are many of our own religious tribe who seem to have shuttled this most basic teaching of Jesus to the side. In fact, among sociologists who study religion, a distinction has drawn between those who are characterized as "Golden Rule Christians" and those who designate themselves as "Born Again Christians," the implication being that those who see the Golden Rule as the essence of faith are somehow less faithful than those who see themselves as born again. I find such distinctions of no value at all, really. They tend only to divide and polarize people of faith. And in this day and time, I have come to believe that dividing and polarizing people is tantamount to a sin against the Holy Spirit. If not unforgivable, it is certainly inexcusable.

The incident Debbie witnessed in her local Fed Ex, the more I have thought about it, could serve as a kind of cautionary tale for us all. But, even more important, it also might help us focus on an alternative that builds bridges and that tears down alienating walls between people.

Our two texts of Scripture today, the first from Jesus, the second from Paul, speak directly to what it means to be a Golden Rule Christian who just keeps getting Born Again over and over and over every day. Both passages speak of being a sort of person who naturally bears a particular sort of fruit. Jesus states this with such beautiful simplicity that any child could understand him: Good trees bear good fruit and bad trees bear bad. You can't pick figs from a thistle bush.

St Paul takes us into the heart of the earliest teachings of the Christian faith. After reminding us that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, Paul provides a sort of commentary on the teachings of Jesus. Paul describes what good and bad fruit look like. And, in doing so, he describes a mystery so deep we can hardly grasp it at all. Somehow, Paul says, somehow, God works deep inside of our spirits to bring them into accord with the Spirit of God. We might even say, as Paul does in another passage, the same Spirit who flowed through Jesus will – if we allow – flow through us. What both Jesus and Paul describe is a natural flow of life and love that somehow comes right from the deep wells of God's being through us.

As C. S. Lewis once wrote in his little classic, *Mere Christianity*: “Now the whole offer which Christianity makes is this: that we can, if we let God have his way, come to share in the life of Christ.... The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.”

While there are many people in our society today who (I believe rightly) worry about the “erosion of civility” in our culture, in politics, and in ordinary every day relationships, like the one Debbie witnessed in that Fed Ex and we've all seen so often; while there are many people who (again, I believe rightly) are concerned about the polarization of our society, its divisiveness and animosity over every conceivable issue; and while they are many (and I am one of them) who long for people to listen and learn from one another's differing perspectives: the call of the gospel – as reflected in our two texts this morning – goes much, much deeper than mere civility.

The gospel of Jesus Christ moves us from doing certain things and avoiding other things to a way of being. The gospel shifts our attention from merely acting according to an agreed upon set of social standards etiquette, manners (which is pretty good if that's all you can get) to living a life that flows from the source of pure love, absolute grace, mercy beyond all measure, from the Spirit of God who is Love. “A good tree,” Jesus says, “cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.” St. Paul elaborates on this theme by drawing a distinction between the fruit produced when we “gratify the desires of the flesh” in contrast to the fruit produced when allow the Spirit of Christ to motivate us. What does Paul mean? In order to explain this, I need to get a little technical for a moment.

Paul's use of the words “flesh” and “spirit” is distinctive and almost unique. These words have been contrasted in some unhelpful ways historically and religiously. For example, under the spell of certain Greek philosophies, “the flesh” was sometimes understood broadly to mean anything having to do with the material world. The spirit, by contrast, was the supernatural or ideal world. That's not what Paul means. Nor does Paul use the phrase “desires of the flesh” to describe human sexuality. Paul regards human sexuality, per se, as a good gift from God, not an evil. And Paul isn't using this term, “flesh,” to justify extreme ascetism, denying oneself any sorts of pleasures or comforts in the belief that this is the way to become “godly.”

Rather, Paul uses the term “flesh” in a technical manner here to speak of those motivations and inten-

tions that are self-centered, opposed to and destructive to communion, the life and love among us that reflects the communion God shares as Father, Son and Spirit. In other words, to live by “the flesh” is to live in a way that puts “me” first, that uses others for my own gratification and my profit, that sacrifices the lives and good of others just so I can have more.

We are created in the image of the God whose being is in communion, and our full humanity is only possible in communion with others. That which opposes the communion, the life and love of God among us is (Paul is telling us) “of the flesh.”

On the other hand, that which shares in and nurtures and furthers communion among us, the life and love of God among us is “of the Spirit.” Communion relies on trust and trustworthiness, humility, mutual care and respect.

And this is why the “works of the flesh” include not only obvious relational fractures, such as fornication, impurity, licentiousness, drunkenness and carousing, all of which we know can undercut our life together, but also (and, notice, in the same list) the “works of the flesh” include idolatry, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions and factions. All of these things are “works of the flesh” because they erode our life together. They bring disintegration to our common life. They place the interests and appetites of one above all others.

“By contrast,” Paul explains, “the fruit of the Spirit” (and notice the word fruit is singular; there is a single fruit which has all the following characteristics); “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” Even as the Spirit that brooded over the face of the primeval deep brought order out of chaos, and in union with the Word of God and the Father created this beautiful world, so the same Spirit is active in each of our hearts, longing to share its fruit, to create a loving communion among us and with others.

One of my favorite thinkers is David Brooks, the New York Times columnist. As you may know, Brooks has been on a sort of spiritual journey for several years. His most recent book, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life*, tells his story. Reading his book, I am struck especially by its very first paragraph. I want to share with you just a little of what Brooks says:

“Every once in a while, I meet a person who radiates joy. These are people who seem to glow with an inner light. They are kind, tranquil, delighted by small pleasures, and grateful for large ones. These people are not perfect. They get exhausted and stressed. They make errors of judgment. But they live for others, and not for themselves. They’ve made unshakable commitments to family, a cause, a community, a faith. They know why they were put on this earth and derive deep satisfaction from doing what they have been called to do. Life isn’t easy for these people. They’ve taken on the burdens of others. But they have a serenity about them, a settled resolve. They are interested in you, make you feel cherished and known, and take delight in your good.

“When you meet these people, you realize that joy is not just a feeling, it can be an outlook. There are temporary highs we all get after we win some victory, and then there is also this other kind of permanent joy that animates people who are not obsessed with themselves but have given themselves away.” (Brooks, *Second Mountain*, xi)

I believe that as followers of Jesus of Nazareth we have a peculiar role to play in our world. And it is a role that is needed now more than ever. We are called to bear the fruit of the Spirit wherever we go, whomever we are with. We are called to do this simply by yielding to God's Spirit, allowing God's Spirit to be at play within us, among us and between us. Wherever the Spirit is at play, communion follows naturally, and communion is nothing less than the life of God among us.

If we are wearied and worried by the plague of incivility, rudeness, vulgarity, and vanity in our society, our first great step is to allow the Spirit to bear fruit in us, so that our branches are loaded down with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Civility isn't the ultimate goal of the life of the Spirit; it is just one small by-product of people living together in a spiritually healthy manner.

If we are sickened by envy, jealousy, bragging and conceit in our society, there is something concrete we can do today. We can allow the Spirit to bear in us the fruit that is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

If we are concerned about the anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, and violence that erupt in our society, we are not helpless. We can, right now, allow the Spirit to bear in us the same fruit that Jesus exuded in his human life among us, the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control that we see in him.

A century and a half ago, the holy heretic of the Church of Scotland, John McLeod Campbell, wrote: "What God is, in that God is love, is what God wills us to be." Or as my dear friend, Morgan Roberts, recently said so eloquently: "Jesus is more than a pattern to be imitated; God is secretly at work in every life, seeking to form the eternal Christ-life in us. You may not be aware of it, but God is at work in your life, day and night, laboring patiently to restore and remake you into the authentic child of God you're meant to be."

The angels in heaven are standing on tip-toes waiting for us to live fully as children of God. The Spirit longs to bring forth in us that fruit that blesses and nourishes everyone around us. The world demonstrates every day its deep need for us simply to be what we were created to be.
Amen.