

Sermon 6-30-19  
Paul Purdue preaching

### **Mission: Life as Grace - June 30, 2019**

The year after Mrs. Her-Name-Withheld read my best dyslexic sentences aloud to her class, my mother coaxed me into repeating the fourth grade at a new school. At Mary Queen of the Holy Rosary I found community, structure, love, and friends. I loved it! Sometimes we chanted like monks at lunch, "Would you trade desert for those Doritos? Yes, I will trade my oatmeal creme pie for your Doritos." It was risky, but the sisters usually giggled!

In fifth grade we passed through the sanctuary several times a day. Twenty kids marching in a single file line to lunch, gym, or music. It unfolded like a line dance, each child reaching the center aisle and pirouetting to face the altar, and then genuflecting on one knee. The line leader set our tempo. If hustling to the gym: speed kneeling. If following Sister Lionel, who rumor said taught Saint Francis of Assisi, we moved at a more contemplative waltz-like pace.

As an anti-dancing protestant, the motions of MQHR felt strange, maybe pagan. I was heir to Luther's protests and traditions found inside the Bible- not in church councils. Some of my Sunday school leaders warned of the dangers of bowing before a carved image- even a crucifix. Let me say, my church was warm and loving. It rarely put all sermons that excluded and judged others in one place, but as a dyslexic oral learner, I surely did. If you must be baptized to evade hell, and if only full immersion is right ... then all my classmates... .

Sister Linonel respected my conscience and never asked me to genuflect. Even as my standing before the cross threw off our choreographed dance line: step, step, pirouette, genuflect, step, step, step, pirouette, genuflect, step, step, step, protestant... step, step, pirouette, genuflect, step. I grew to love Mary Queen, especially no school on All Saints Day, which meant staying out late trick or treating and playing poker in Mark Kaleiegh's basement betting peanut butter chews and Snickers bars until midnight. One day as my class moved quietly through Mary Queen's sanctuary, lost in some daydream, I just fell into the rhythm of my class and almost by accident pirouetted and genuflected. On one knee before the cross, I wobbled a bit, blushing with middle school shame and wondering if my knee bending was a sin. Adding to my pre-adolescent anxiety Sister Lionel smiled at her unbroken line. Now, if I did not kneel coming back from lunch would it appear a slight? I am sure those of you not raised in fundamentalist churches must think "this is crazy". It is. And yet, these little practices may define us more than we know.

You could apply Galatians 5 to my pre-teen genuflecting crisis. In Christ, genuflecting or not genuflecting does not matter. What matters is faith acting in love. I wish someone had said, "Paul, you can stand in reverent awe or kneel and do the same, but to stand in judgement while others seek God, well might be a sin."

As Jefferson told us two weeks ago, we can experience outward intellectual or legal liberation, but our inner transformation may take much longer. I had to learn in my heart that Miriam danced before the Lord before I could dance without shame. I had to slowly understand down in my bones that I could argue with God like Moses. It took time for my heart to grasp that Jesus made excellent wine, flipped over tables, wept openly, and sometimes called religious leaders white-washed tombs! So hear Paul's letter to the church in Galatia, paraphrased and free from the specific issue of the early church- "circumcision":

Christ has set us free for freedom. Stand firm and don't submit to old rules. Look, I am telling you Galatians, that if you go back to those old rules, Christ won't help you! If you live by some of those old rules then must keep them all. You people, if you try to become righteous by rules, you have fallen away from grace! You are estranged from grace! These old rules don't matter! All that matters is faith working through love.

Mark 7 tells us about a time when Jesus' disciples defied the religious handwashing rules. The Pharisees asked a question about breaking trusted traditions. Jesus' answer plumbs deeper waters than the spiritual shallows of handwashing or genuflecting: "Nothing outside of a person can enter and contaminate a person in God's sight; rather, the things that come out of a person contaminate the person." Later the disciples want to be clear so they asked Jesus about his answer. "Don't you understand? Don't you know that nothing from the outside that enters a person has the power to contaminate them? That's because it doesn't enter into the heart but into the stomach, and it goes out into the sewer. It's what comes out of a person that contaminates someone in God's sight. It's from the inside, from the human heart, that evil thoughts come: pornographic expression, theft, murder, adultery, lust, greed, evil, deceit, unrestrained action, envy, insults, arrogance, and foolishness. All these evil actions come from inside your hearts and contaminate your souls." Now Mark comments that "Jesus declared that no food could contaminate a person in God's sight" but Mark's commentary limits what Jesus really said, making a rule from a principle.

Jesus offers a moral standard not rooted in rules but revealed inside hearts. Jesus does more than judge pork barbecue pot-luck worthy. Jesus calls us to move beyond the black ink and white paper rigidity of rules. Jesus calls us into vague ideals more transformative than paper thin rules. Indeed, Jesus does not reject kosher meals or handwashing, but instead affirms that morality lies in our intentionality more than some legal code.

Now to not wash hands did not shake up the early church, but when Peter baptized the uncircumcised Roman Colonel Cornelius, the church teetered toward schism. (Acts 10-17) Genesis 17 tells us circumcision defines Abraham's eternal covenant with God. So the people are up in arms. Trusted old rules seem to be collapsing. The bishop broke the rules! Suddenly, everything seemed in flux! The defining portal of Judaism, upheld by Mary and Joseph, was gone. Catching the backlash, Peter backed off. In Galatians 2, Paul describes that tumultuous time, "when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed Peter to his face, because the bishop was wrong. Peter had been eating with the Gentiles before certain people came from James. But when they came, Peter began to back out and separate himself, because he was afraid of the people who promoted circumcision. And the rest of that bunch joined in the hypocrisy, even Barnabas got carried away with it." By chapter 5 Paul gets so torqued up with the bewitched law-loving Galatians, he writes, "I wish that the ones who are upsetting you would castrate themselves!" Maybe someone will find an older scroll where Paul wrote "LOL" after that rant! But as one who has been a bit angry, myself, I decided to point out 5:13 and ask for your forgiveness! Let us focus more on Paul's argument than his hot-headedness! Christ has set us free for freedom. Stand firm! These old rules don't matter! All that matters is faith working through love.

The old kosher guard, the party of circumcision, struggled to understand. They had defined their faithfulness by a series of religious practices. Paul calls those trusted guardrails "nothing." We might be tempted to poo-poo today's party of the circumcision, but love listens. And indeed, the traditionalists have a good question: "If all means all, then does anything go?" If we no longer must eat kosher food, can we eat cake for breakfast? If we do not stone sabbath breakers, can I skip church? If gays can marry, can I cheat on my spouse? If people can remarry, does marriage matter? If the man is

not the head of the house, should pre-teens set the family budget? If blended fabrics are acceptable, is public nudity okay? If women are allowed to preach, does the Word of God matter? If I can eat food offered to idols, then can I worship idols? When the hard rules fall away, it can be confusing.

Paul has a brilliant answer to such questions. It is grounded in Jesus' great commandment: Christ has set us free for freedom. What really matters is faith working through love. But don't use your freedom to indulge your selfish impulses. Instead serve each other through love. All the law has been fulfilled in a single statement: love your neighbor as yourself. Spiritual living is not doing whatever you want. When we live a spiritual life we are not driven by self-centered impulses.

Indeed, it is easy to spot unspiritual living. Watch out for pornography, corruption, doing whatever feels good, idolatry, drug use, dabbling in magic, hate, fighting, obsession, losing your temper, competitive opposition, conflict, selfishness, group rivalry, jealousy, drunkenness, partying, and other things like that.

In contrast, the fruit of spiritual living is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against things like this. The law never grows values like that- but love does!

So if all means all, then is anything or any relationship okay? Well, the short answer is "No, spiritual living is not doing whatever you want! What matters is faith working through love. Don't use your freedom to indulge your selfish desires. Love your neighbor as yourself. Do what tends toward love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control! Ask yourself: does this relationship break promises, seem pornographic, corrupt, hedonistic, lustful, hateful, full of fights, obsessive, angry, predatory, hyper-competitive, oppositional, conflict-ridden, selfish, tribal, jealous, drunken, filled with escapist partying, unequal, no-fun, gossipy or things like that? Listen, Paul gives us a guide to uncovering a sinful relationships. It is characterized by broken promises, pornographic attitudes, always doing what feels good, lust, hate, fighting, obsessing, anger, predation, hyper-competitiveness, opposition, conflict, selfishness, tribalism, jealousy, drunkenness, partying, inequality, joylessness, gossip and things like that! Jesus said you can know a person by their way of being, by the fruit of their living! (Matthew 7, 12) Jesus said it is out of the heart that evil stuff comes, not by an adherence to unalterable rules like circumcision, handwashing, kosher diets, patriarchy, or never divorcing.

So if all means all, the question is not who do you love, but how do you love? The question is not do you tithe, but does all your spending honor God and serve your neighbor as yourself? The question is not can we have a little wine, but do we worship God with all our minds or try to engage in escapist partying? The question is not can a divorced pastor serve in the church, but does the leader demonstrate love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? The question is not do you genuflect, but do you love God with all you got and love neighbor as yourself?

Oh Jesus, You have set us free, You made us for freedom. Help us not to use our freedom to indulge our selfish impulses, desires, and interests. Teach us to serve each other with love. All your law is summed up in one statement: Love your neighbor as yourself. So, free us from the bewitching pull of legalism for what matters is faith working through love. In our freedom, remind us that spiritual living is not doing whatever we want. Instead, guide us so that our lives produce love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Rules will never grow such fruit in our lives, so help us embrace your divine acceptance of us, allowing radical grace to heal our hearts, so that you might grow beautiful rich fruit in our daily living! Amen!

