

Galatians 5:13-25 Produce
June 30, 2019

I want to begin this morning by talking for a few minutes about Evening Prayers. On Sunday, July 7, only one week away, we will meet at 6 pm for Evening Prayer, or what some traditions simply call, “Vespers.”

The services, of which there will be four this summer, two in July and two August, will be reverential in nature but down-to-earth. They will involve some music, a hymn or two, some readings, time for meditation, sharing, and, of course, prayer.

The purpose is two-fold. One purpose is to give some time away from the routines of life, a sanctuary kind of experience; the other is to help us as we seek to encounter God.

A stronger faith, a deeper peace, a humble attitude towards sin and a quiet assurance of mercy, a sense of guidance, strength, compassion, kindness, courage; these are the outcomes we seek along with unity and purpose.

Evening Prayers is meant to extend The Year for Prayer emphasis. I hope that what we have learned and discussed throughout the year will help make it meaningful, and I hope each of you will attend at least one time.

I also want to encourage each of you to keep your commitment to the Prayer Chest ministry, which is ongoing and helpful.

The Church

There is much going on in the world of religious faith these days. There are many different organizations that are Christian in expression and in confession. When someone tries to take it all in, it can be intimidating and overwhelming.

Many of our so-called denominations arose out of some kind of disagreement among Christians somewhere, in the past. We have found that sometimes the old disagreements have faded in their power and that we have less in common with some in our own denomination than with those of other “parts,” of the Christian family.

Some of this is merely the chaotic result of church-state separation and religious freedom, which makes Christians look more divided than they actually are. But there is no way around that the Christian family is divided, conflicted within itself, and thus very messy. Some see the messiness and are embarrassed and devastated about it. There is a lot of pain in it. Other see the messiness as beautiful, like abstract art, pain can be holy.

While most would like to believe that their distinctiveness is the result of strongly-held convictions, sometimes it is hard not to conclude

hardheaded stubbornness and cold-heartedness is to the root of things.

The World

The situation in the larger world is just as divided. And even though by some measure the world is better off now than it has ever been, there is a pervasive sense of doom that it is only a matter of time before the wheels come off and everything goes to pieces again.

The conflict in political discourse in our own country, which is reflected in our own congregation, and in other countries like Great Britain, where a slight majority led a decision to leave the European Union. The leaders there have been left not really wanting to leave and without really knowing how to do it, thus not having a plan.

Or the situation in the middle east with all its danger and complexity. One never knows when violence will intensify and a larger regional war ensue. Or situations involving India, China, or Russia confound the mind and raise the blood pressure and create, at least in me, the desire to ignore it all and pretend it isn't real and hope it will all go away.

The truth is that we are all just acting the same way people have always acted; with a combination of fear about our own future that conquers compassionate concern for others; selfish, anxious, frustrated, angry, scared out of our wits, wanting to protect our place

even to the disregard of the place of others, devaluing their humanity.

All this is not new, but it *is* discouraging because we keep hoping that it will all change and the world will get to a better place. Galatians is instructive, especially in the chapter 5 text read for us here today.

Galatians

The first thing this text tells us is to love. The nature of this love is that by definition it causes a person to, if not disregard their own well-being, at least subordinate it to the consideration of others. "You are set free" it tells us, "only use your freedom to serve one another in love rather than indulge the flesh. Love your neighbor as yourself."

And then these words, which we should hear as Christians, and relate them to the way we view and treat other Christians, but also as human beings, generally speaking, and relate them to the broader set of relationships in which one must participate in such a diverse world as ours. Listen to them, and perhaps let them *be* the message, the "Word of the Lord," for the day;

"If you keep biting and devouring one another, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other!"

The Flesh

Next there is a simple listing of the results of living a life characterized by selfishness and the willingness to disregard others. Paul calls it the “flesh,” but it is often called the “sinful nature.” This distinction qualifies that our bodily condition is not sinful in itself, and the desires of the body are not sinful. Flesh is not evil.

But one must maintain some sense of relationship between the physical nature of our condition and sinfulness, for what we are being told is that when we make it our life’s end to satisfy the physical desires, then it is sin, and the result is bad, a list (not comprehensive) is given.

“Sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and the like,”

Needless to say, these kinds of things are condemned. There is no hope of eternal life for those who persist in putting first the self, even if they are able to make themselves believe that they are in fact concerned about others.

The Spirit

All this is opposed to a life filled with the Spirit. The opposition is not between concern for the self and concern for others, although even Paul can speak of it this way, as he has just done. The opposition is

between the Flesh and the Spirit. Then we are given the infamous list of the Spirit’s produce, what the Spirit produces in us. And we are told that the flesh is dead, the Spirit is alive.

“Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” I am pretty sure this list is not comprehensive.

So in the discouraging chaos of everyday life, let us all keep up with the Spirit, who *has* been given to us, who works in us to center our lives in Christ, which produces an unselfish love, an inexpressible joy and an uncommon peace, and all the rest.

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