

A Sermon for the Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity, September 13, 2009

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“Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.” (from the epistle, Galatians 5:16f.).

Our epistle tells us that to “walk in the Spirit” is the answer to sin. That is, if we walk in the Spirit, we won’t be doing all the disordered and destructive things that the epistle lists under the “lusts of the flesh.” But what does it mean to “walk in the Spirit”? Does it mean to go about trying to be spiritual—to go about with an other-worldly look on our faces? Does it mean to ignore the needs and wants of the body and only think about spiritual things?

We can understand what the epistle is exhorting us to do in the light of the creation and fall of man. Man was created in the image of God. Genesis tells us that God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (2:7). The word “breath” in Genesis is the same as the word for “spirit.” The same breath or Spirit that gave man life also directed that life according to the will of God. That is to say, before the Fall, the natural impulse of man was to “walk in the Spirit.”

Sin, the fall of man, brought death into the world. Death brought an end to life “in the Spirit.” Man no longer lived in communion with his maker and, thus, came to be controlled by mere physical desires. The early chapters of Genesis, and our own daily news, tell us of the murder and mayhem that ensued.

The severing of the spiritual connection between God and man is the main form of death that Genesis says is the consequence of sin. The first humans did not die physically the day they sinned. Rather, they died spiritually. They were cut off from the source of life. Physical death was a subsequent consequence of spiritual death.

The gift of the Holy Spirit is presented in the New Testament as a restoration of the life that was lost through the first sin. After the Resurrection, Jesus breathed on the apostles and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:22). This is an obvious allusion to the breath that gave life in Genesis 2:7. With the gift of the Spirit, we are restored to life in the Spirit, in communion with God.

Thus, the exhortation to “walk in the Spirit” is an exhortation to live life in communion with God—the communion we enjoy because of what Christ has done for us. The logic of the epistle is that if we live life in communion with God “in the Spirit” we will not be controlled by the desires of our fallen nature.

Life in the Spirit is a life of prayer. The privilege of restored communion is that we are able to pray to the Father through the Son in the Spirit. Galatians says, “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts crying “Abba, Father” (4:6). As prayer, and the experience of communion that results from prayer, become the central habits of our life, the natural result is that we “walk in the Spirit.” The life of prayer leads us into behavior that is pleasing to God and produces in us the fruits of the Spirit, such as love, joy, peace, longsuffering and self-control.

Apart from a life of prayer, we cannot walk in the Spirit. The Christian life is not a series of moral decisions made by will power. It is a life of prayer in Christ, in the Spirit, which then leads us to do the

things that please God. When we neglect the life of prayer, we experience a subtle drift away from God and toward the desires of the flesh. That is why we can't live faithfully as Christians without a commitment to a life of prayer.

We typically understand prayer as consisting of four things: adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication. The gospel (Luke 17:11f.) gives us opportunity to highlight the prayer of thanksgiving. Of the ten lepers that were healed, only one turned back to give thanks to Jesus. Perhaps the others were in a hurry to go to the temple and be certified as healed so that they could resume a normal life. As he went, the Samaritan probably realized that he couldn't go to the temple because he was a Samaritan. So he returned to Jesus to give him thanks. And Jesus, the new temple, proclaimed that he had been made whole.

We, also, must learn to return and give thanks. Of course, we know that we are supposed to "count our blessings," but that is only the beginning. Thanksgiving must become an attitude that touches every part of life—even the bad parts. We often ask why this or that thing happened or why God didn't organize life in a better way. If we allow it, each day we will have our gripes about what was done to us or how we were treated. When we practice the prayer of thanksgiving, the narrowness of this perspective is exposed. We realize that the question is not, why did this happen to me? The question is why am I alive at all? The question is not, why is there evil in the world and in my life? The question is why am I so privileged to experience redemption through the Lord Jesus?

In the higher form of thanksgiving, we thank God not only for the good things but also for his presence in the bad things; how he works through our pain to make us better people; how he is continually present to make all things work for good for those who love him. Thanksgiving reminds us that God is not the author of evil, but he is the redeemer of it. The prayer of thanksgiving reminds us that without Jesus, the world and each of us would still have pain. We would still have, in a sense, the cross. But, without Jesus, we would not have the experience and hope of Easter.

Because it is so important to cultivate an attitude of thanksgiving, I advocate using the General Thanksgiving on page 33 of the Prayer Book during Evening Prayer each day. This prayer provides a place to add particular things for which we are giving thanks. It also reminds us of the hierarchy of thanksgiving; that we are thankful, "above all for the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory."

Of course, thankful people do not pick fights and stir up strife; thankful people are not envious. People who understand that life is a gift do not abuse the gift with destructive and hurtful behavior. As the epistle says, "Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh."

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