

# “Guided in Life”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – June 26, 2022*

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 16:5-11

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Galatians 5:13-17, 25

There’s an old adage which says that ministers should preach with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other; that these ancient words of wisdom and current events must be in constant conversation.

In a week like this, the newspaper can seem extra heavy. With the ongoing war in Ukraine and approval of the vaccine for young children, with yet another mass shooting – this time at a PRIDE event in Norway – and with decisions from the Supreme Court on guns and reproductive rights; there is a lot of news for us to process. I’m sure we are all experiencing strong – even if differing – emotions: confusion, anxiety, sadness, or anger.

But, this week – like every week – we are challenged to remember what we hold in the other hand; and that the Bible is filled not only with ancient stories, but that it is God’s living word.

This morning, we look again at Paul’s letter to the Galatians and to his reminder about what true freedom is. In Christ, we have been set free to serve one another in love. Not only have we been set free from bondage to the Law – from trying to earn God’s love by keeping every rule – we also are set free from self-indulgence: what Paul calls slavery to the flesh. Freed from the self, we are free to serve our neighbor, to become slaves to one another through love.

Paul was aware that his emphasis on freedom could be viewed as dangerous. Freedom from the requirements of the Law does not mean “anything goes,” or an opportunity for self-indulgence; it still has constraints. The fleshly self is never satisfied, never has enough esteem, wealth, pleasure, or whatever else it is seeking. But, freedom’s constraints are the responsibility and commitment to the welfare of others in the community.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Peeler from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Christ frees us not only from the Law, but from the sinful self. To serve through love means that serving is done not to meet the demands of the law or even to feel better about ourselves. It is focused on the needs of the neighbor.

This week, during Compassion Camp, we learned that serving our neighbor begins with empathy: the ability to see and feel what others are experiencing. There are people around us that are experiencing hunger and thirst, who are suffering from pain, confusion, and loss. Before we can act with compassion, we must first see through their eyes and feel what they feel. We need to make room at our tables and welcome them in.

We also learned that acting with compassion sometimes requires bravery. There will be obstacles to overcome and we likely will need to find and trust allies to help us; but in order to serve our neighbors selflessly, we will need to walk in Christ's way and live in the Spirit.

In this passage from Galatians, Paul references the Old Testament command to love our neighbors, but fails to mention what Jesus adds: that in order for us to serve others, we must also love ourselves. This is the third step of compassion: in order to carefully and selflessly, the self needs care.

On our final day of Compassion Camp, we learned about a fourth aspect of compassion: that it begins with justice. God envisions a world where oppression is erased and equity reigns. A time will come when prisoners are released and debts are forgiven. That day, of course, has not yet come. But we can bring it closer by practicing compassion: treating others respectfully and with forgiveness. These selfless, seemingly small steps can be cumulative; they help to transform and shape a loving community.

And so, Paul says, live by the Spirit. Instead of living to fulfill the Law or to feed our self-indulgent impulses, we are to live in a manner that is guided by God's vision of a world where the needs of the community are put at the center. This is an all-encompassing way of life; constantly seeking to serve the neighbor.<sup>2</sup>

This is not the way freedom is usually described in today's world. Freedom is often presented as a synonym of autonomy. We think that of freedom as the right to put the self first.

This is what you might believe if all you pick up to read is the newspaper. But, as Paul rightly foresaw, this type of self-centered freedom leads either to

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<sup>2</sup> Elisabeth Johnson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

legalism or self-indulgence. The rights and needs, the pains and longings of others become secondary. Paul describes this in very graphic language: he says it is like biting and devouring one another: it's cannibalism.

But what the flesh desires is contrary to the Spirit, Paul says, and where the Spirit guides is away from the uncontrolled whims of the flesh. He will go on to list for the Galatians some of the fruits of the flesh: among them enmity, envy, and strife. In the same way, he offers a partial list of the fruits of the Spirit: kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and the like.

For Paul, we are not called into some vague spiritual life. We have instead been called into a world that is empowered by, filled with, and shaped in accordance with the Spirit. Paul has every expectation that this congregation will be able and ought to heed his words. He believes that they can distinguish between the values of a world seen through and by the Spirit; and one that is not.<sup>3</sup>

The ways that we do or do not love our neighbors (and ourselves) matters. This is how the ancient words of scripture impact the way we interact with today's current events. Thus, it is how a congregation and its members reach beyond themselves that defines its spiritual life.

In this Christian community, we live in and through the Spirit by giving of ourselves – our time and talents, our energies and resources – for the sake of others. We celebrate teachers and learners locally and internationally, we think it is important to nurture and encourage growth, we support caregivers and those who build up community efforts and institutions. We believe it is important to help build houses for those who are without them, to feed those who are hungry and work to end those conditions that perpetuate need. We promote equity and advocate for the elimination of oppression. We profess an open table that is accessible through open doors. We elevate compassion as a central tenet of faith.

Other Christian communities might choose different emphases or projects. Some with more people, greater resources, or louder voices might seem to make a bigger impact. But, if any church's efforts are focused only inwardly, the result will look less like God's vision of justice; it will bear marks less like the fruits of the Spirit.<sup>4</sup>

Paul longs for his congregation in Galatia – and every subsequent Christian community – to be guided in life. We can choose to let the Law be our guide,

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<sup>3</sup> Sarah Henrick from *WorkingPreacher.com*

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Prior, "Not About Me"

imposing and enforcing more and more laws. Or we can choose to exercise freedom as autonomy, indulging our personal wants and whims above and beyond those of our neighbors.

Or, instead, we can be guided in life by the Spirit. We can choose to live lives filled with compassion, loving others – and ourselves – as servants of the common good.

For those among us and around us who – this week – are feeling anxious, angry, sad, or afraid, this may seem like a tall order. Adhering to rules and indulging the self may appear to be safer ways to go. But thankfully, the newspaper is not our only guide; God's living word continues to point us in a different direction: loving others, for our common good. Amen.