

“For the Common Good”

Valley Presbyterian Church – July 3, 2022

4th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 30

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Ephesians 6:1-10

I planted Swiss chard in my garden at home for the first time this summer. We have been growing it in the Faith Garden here at the church for several years. It has a beautiful green leaf and stalks that are yellow, orange, or red. When sautéed with oil and garlic, its bitterness when raw turns to a delicious complement to sweet peppers and tomatoes.

In today’s reading from the final chapter of Galatians, Paul tells us in plain language that “you reap what you sow.” This may seem like a simple principle in gardening, but it holds more nuance when we consider its wisdom for the rest of our lives. For the bulk of the letter, he has been telling his readers that Christians are justified by grace made possible through the crucified Jesus; that we must be guided by the Spirit, not the Law. Still, we have free will; our actions have consequences that follow them.

Paul has more to say about what the life of people who live by the Spirit looks like. We are to assist one another; to do what is given for you to do on behalf of your neighbor, as God – on behalf of God’s people – has done what needed to be done for them. Paul reminds us here that this is not an easy way to live, thus we must not become weary.

Such a life requires graciousness, perseverance, and a refusal to judge who is worthy of help and who is not. Such a life needs the Spirit’s presence surrounding and infusing it. And, it needs the presence of others to assist us when we falter.¹

Paul offers the example of dealing with a member of the community found to have committed a transgression. “You who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness,” he says. Gentleness is one of the fruits of the Spirit. In this week’s book study group, we talked about how – in scripture – being gentle does not imply weakness, but instead equity, fairness, and even-

¹ Sara Heinrich from *WorkingPreacher.com*

handedness. The goal of dealing with the transgressor is not punishment, but restoration – as when a doctor sets a bone back in its proper place – so that proper healing can occur.²

Paul holds a radical understanding of the responsibility believers have for one another. They are to share all burdens, even the burdens of guilt when one of them goes astray. Loving the neighbor in this way means resisting self-deception, recognizing that I am just as vulnerable to temptation as my neighbor, every bit as dependent on God’s grace. Rather than comparing myself to my neighbor, I instead engage in self-examination: “all must test their own work,” Paul says;” then that work, rather than their neighbor’s work, will become a cause for pride.”

Is it possible to imagine that we could reject the measurements of value commonly used in the everyday world; that we could devote ourselves to one another’s well-being, confident that there will be others to care for us; that God – through God’s people – would help us bear our burdens?

Perhaps the best way to wrap our minds around this principle of the common good and live in accord with the Spirit is to bear burdens more graciously. That is, to consider ourselves privileged to hear one another’s dreams and desires, to continuously extend the tables around which we sit and the meals we call holy; to make room for people whose gifts and challenges will surprise us. When we listen, when we embrace difference, when we offer and receive the hospitality of others, we catch a glimpse of God’s vision and are infused with the energy of the Spirit, lest we grow weary.

Too often, the dynamics within our churches simply mirror those of the world. We see examples of finger-pointing for whatever is perceived to be wrong and judgment for those who are perceived to have messed up. As a result, many of those who experience crisis in their lives avoid the church from fear of judgment or condescension. The person or family in crisis grows more isolated and the community of faith is not the place of restoration and healing it should be.

This is true for far too many people or families that have experienced traumatic events such as divorce, bankruptcy, suicide, or addiction. Partly because we don’t want to imagine that it might happen to us, we tend to look at others with judgement rather than gentleness; seeking to assign fault or blame instead of providing understanding and care. Here, Paul reminds the people of his

² Elisabeth Johnson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

congregation that we all depend on grace and none of us can always do it on our own.

Bearing one another's burdens can be a tall order and a fine line to walk. The temptations of excessive meddling, self-deception, and judging the neighbor are ever present. Yet, we are called to be an alternative community of God's mercy, healing, and restoration in what can be an unforgiving world. This is only possible by the power of the Spirit; and only by God remaking us as new creations in Christ.

There is a paradox to this statement "you reap what you sow." While it is true, as Paul says, that those who pursue to flesh may have more trouble discerning the prodding of the Spirit, faith is greater than understanding, truth is never straightforward, and God can mysteriously hold together what would otherwise be divided.³

As members of the body of Christ, we are called to work for the common good. In some ways, this seems straightforward; we are instructed to share what we have: to give alms to the poor without conditions and share our food with the hungry. But, in other ways, this call to the common good can be more complicated. Are we committed to equal protections under the law, to fairness in our democratic representation, to justice for all regardless of race, gender, identity, or station? What personal gain might we be willing to sacrifice for the good of our neighbor?

We are encouraged by Paul to live within this paradox of faith. Through the gospel, we have been called both to obedience and freedom. The interests of the common good will not be served if we retreat from our responsibilities to care for others, and yet we are not always told exactly how we are to contribute. We all have been created with different gifts, and so we must discern how best to apply ourselves to the needs that are present. Each of us are passionate about different issues and must choose how to apply our energies in the most productive manner.

This weekend, we remember the liberties that have been granted to each of us through our constitutional protections: including freedom of speech, assembly, and religious practice. In choosing the Christian faith, we also devote ourselves to love of neighbor: trusting that the restoration and healing of others is in our best interests because it promotes a common good: unity expressed in diversity.

³ Mark Douglas in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol. 3

Sometimes beyond even our best reasoning, love for our neighbor is an act of faith; an obedience to the gospel that we are both compelled and free to pursue.

When I prepared the garden soil, planted the seeds, and watered them, I was unsure which of them would germinate and grow; and I certainly did not know which of the Swiss chard plants would produce yellow, orange, or red stalks. Yes, we reap what we sow. But each of our actions are still acts of faith, trusting that God can use our gentleness to create the beautiful unity in diversity that Christ envisioned when he commanded us to love our neighbor – each and every one of them – as we love ourselves. Thanks be to God. Amen.