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Psalm 139:1-10 & Galatians 5:13-25

Deeper in Faith: Values & Practices

Last week we heard from the Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Phillipi, a letter characterized by warm affection and encouragement for the gathered community. This morning we hear from Paul's letter to a collective of churches in Galatia, an area in what was known as Asia Minor, in the highlands of Anatolia in modern Turkey. The letter to the Galatians was an early letter of Paul's when the church was struggling how to incorporate those of a non-Jewish heritage, known as Gentiles, with those of a Jewish heritage. This was not always smooth sailing, with culture clashes along the way. In our passage today, Paul speaks directly and bluntly about what it means to live in community, arguing that through the Gospel of Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can be transformed and a new multiethnic community of God created. Hear now these words from Galatians 5:13-25 from the Common English Bible translation:

You were called to freedom, siblings; only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other through love. All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement: Love your neighbor as yourself. But if you bite and devour each other, be careful that you don't get eaten up by each other!

I say be guided by the Spirit and you won't carry out your selfish desires. A person's selfish desires are set against the Spirit, and the Spirit is set against one's selfish desires. They are opposed to each other, so you shouldn't do whatever you want to do. But if you are being led by the Spirit, you aren't under the Law. The actions that are produced by selfish motives are obvious, since they include sexual immorality, moral corruption, doing whatever feels good, idolatry, drug use and casting spells, hate, fighting, obsession, losing your temper, competitive opposition, conflict, selfishness, group rivalry, jealousy, drunkenness, partying, and other things like that. I warn you as I have already warned you, that those who do these kinds of things won't inherit God's kingdom.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against things like this. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the self with its passions and its desires. If we live by the Spirit, let's follow the Spirit. **The Word of God to the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

"You were called to freedom, siblings; only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other through love." On this weekend when we celebrate the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, many of us with mixed emotions about who we are as a nation and what we aspire to be, we acknowledge our individual calls to freedom, as well as our communal call to freedom. We celebrate freedom as an important value. When I chose this set of resources from the Omaha Presbyterian Seminary Foundation

for our summer worship series, I did not set out to have this particular Sunday be focused on our values as a people of faith and how we can practice those values. So let's give a big Amen to the Holy Spirit, for the gift of providence that this scripture and topic aligned with the Independence Day holiday.

"You were called to freedom, siblings; only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other through love." What I so appreciate about Paul's words to churches that were struggling to move from parochial bickering, divisiveness, and just a lot of ugliness to each other, was that freedom was at the heart of Paul's words. Those in the early church were free to indulge in their selfish impulses. And Paul is not shy about listing what those selfish impulses are. I think we each can see ourselves somewhere in Paul's list of selfish desires and motives that are set against the Spirit. And certainly God can see those as well. God, who has searched us and known us, who discerns our thoughts from far away; God who is acquainted with all our ways; and even before a word is on our tongue, God knows it completely, as we heard from the opening words of Psalm 139 that Elliot read.

Yes, those in the early church, as we are today, were free to indulge in their selfish impulses. And yet, Paul gives them another path: "You were called to freedom, siblings; only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other through love." And then Paul goes on to share what that other path looks like: But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

Paul writes that the gifts of the Spirit can transform those who insist on living by the letter of the laws spelled out in the Torah into a people who live by the Spirit of the law – that is to love your neighbor as yourself; to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with God. The Spirit can transform us from an old humanity to a new humanity. As the commentators from the Bible Project note, "the habits of the old humanity are obvious—behaviors that dehumanize people and destroy relationships and communities..."¹ The new humanity in contrast, is focused on emulating Jesus' life - his life becomes our life.

In reflecting on this passage, spiritual director Diane Stephens Hogue notes that "In the 4th century, a movement begins to emerge with the fruits of the spirit as a way of living. Responding to the rapid expansion of Christianity with increasingly formal doctrine, some of our most faithful, put-your-money-where-your-mouth-is forebears left their homes and families and went out into the deserts of the Middle East to live a life inspired primarily by the teachings of Jesus. They were further concerned that the temptations, political intrigue, and disease of their cities and towns, along with the new church structure and order, were confining their faith and impeding their ability to live Christ-centered lives."²

¹ The Bible Project. Commentary on the Book of Galatians. Online at <https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-galatians/#galatians-5-6-living-by-the-spirit-and-new-creation>

² Diane Stephens Hogue. *Sermon Notes Week 3. Deeper in Faith*. Omaha Presbyterian Foundation; 2026

As we celebrate America at 250, these words from Stephens Hogue ring true. Living with the values of the “fruits of the Spirit” is a counter to the “temptations, political intrigue, and diseases” that afflict our country today, which stem from selfishness. One hundred and seventy four years ago, 76 years after the Declaration of Independence was signed, statesman and writer Frederick Douglass identified this tension. On July 5, 1852, Frederick Douglass gave a keynote address at an Independence Day celebration and asked, “*What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?*” Douglass’ speech was an indictment of the America’s failure to live up to its professed values. He said: “I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us. I am not included within the pale of glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought light and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn.”³

I acknowledge these are hard words to hear, hard words to hear on a celebratory holiday. Hard words for me as one who loves the pomp and circumstance of the July 4th holiday. Growing up in the suburbs of Washington D.C., the July 4th festivities in the city were a big deal for me and my family. Every summer from the earliest days I can remember, we would get up early in the morning and head into town. When I say early, I mean a good 12 hours before the fireworks would start, as my dad had a prized spot for parking. It was at the Tidal Basin and made for an easy escape after the celebrations ended. We would spend the day watching the big parade, and then at the National Folklife Festival on the Mall, drinking lemonade through a candy cane straw, listening to music and eating exotic foods from the states and countries who were exhibiting. We’d hit the Smithsonian museums in the afternoon seeking air conditioning. My dad would drag the cooler from the station wagon and we’d picnic on the National Mall while listening to music from various bands. And then watch the magnificent fireworks.

The Bicentennial year was especially fun. I had just finished 5th grade and my Girl Scout troop got to march in the parade down Constitution Avenue. It was a really big deal. The Washington Metro subway opened its first line that year and we would ride it just to ride. And the National Air Space Museum opened that year with its IMAX theater – an inspirational joy for a girl who dreamed of being an astronomer. But what my 10 - almost 11 year old self – didn’t fully appreciate was the way many in the country were mourning that year, a little over a year after the Vietnam War had officially ended; a year with tough economic times and a divisive election, the first presidential election since 1932 in which the incumbent was defeated. Not long after the scandal of Watergate, where elected and appointed government officials failed to live into the values we profess as a nation.

³ Frederick Douglass. “*What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?*” , 1852. Retrieved from the National Museum of African History and Culture. <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/nations-story-what-slave-fourth-july>

So to paraphrase Frederick Douglass, while I was rejoicing, many were mourning. The same holds true today. While we rejoice for the freedoms we hold dear, our triumphs as a people, our inventiveness, creativity, fortitude and resilience, we also mourn for the ways we have failed to uphold the promise of freedom and the values of love, peace, kindness, goodness, and faithfulness. And as much as we need to repent of our collective sins, and we do need to repent, we also sit in the promise of transformation. The promise that we can do and be better as a people – individually and collectively when we live into the values of the Spirit. The final hymn in our worship service this morning is *O Beautiful for Spacious Skies*, which includes these words: *God mend thine every flaw, Confirm thy soul in self-control, Thy liberty in law!*

Christian freedom is a gracious gift that comes from God's justifying grace in Jesus Christ, and realized in us by the Holy Spirit. It is freedom for love. On this Independence Day weekend, I think about Christ's call to bring good news to the poor; to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. I think about the choices we have as a people in this country in 2026. I think about *The New Colossus* written by Emma Lazarus found on the Statue of Liberty

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"⁴

Throughout his letters the Apostle Paul tells us to have the mindset of Christ and to be imitators of Christ. Who did Christ Jesus say that he is? I am the Light of the World, Jesus said. I am the Bread of Life. He is the one who brings reversal, rescue and restoration. And freedom. As Paul reminds us, "You were called to freedom, siblings; only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other through love." All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement: Love your neighbor as yourself." Join me in prayer.

⁴ Emma Lazarus. *The New Colossus*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46550/the-new-colossus>