

June 30, 2019

Galatians 13-25

Pastor Katya Brodbeck - Powell United Methodist Church

“Guided by the Spirit”

I want to ask you and myself today this question: What are our lives guided by? What drives us in our decision making, in our actions, in our navigating through life’s challenges? Are there any principles that we all live by? Some people live by the principles of the 12 steps program. My dad who is a recovering alcoholic lives by those principles: honesty, hope, faith, courage, integrity, brotherly love, humility, service and others. These principles helped my dad to stay sober for 16 years now. I am very grateful for that.

This week we are celebrating the Independence Day. I still remember when I was taking the Citizenship test two years ago, I had to memorize the three main principles that are stated in the Declaration of Independence: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These principles promise a life that will be rooted in the equal opportunity to pursue happiness and success according to anyone’s ability. We call this the American Dream. The American Dream is a belief that anyone in the US can achieve their own version of success even if they were not born here. America is a land of opportunity for all. If one works hard, takes risks, and carefully manages money, then they most likely will be able to move upward in society and have a better life. So, when we live by certain principles, they produce certain results.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the churches in Galatia in his letter and in this fifth chapter in the verses that Sandy read for us, talks about two principles that the community can live by and the two will yield very different results: the flesh and the Holy Spirit. I know that the word flesh can be easily misunderstood. Some think that flesh is our body. And this is not what Paul is talking about here. Christianity has a long history of considering our bodies as something bad and sinful, something not to be celebrated. But the word flesh here represents that part of humanity that lives at odds with God, the one that is separated from God, the one that is self-centered and prone to sin. In fact, the word flesh can be translated as self-indulgence. So, this flesh of ours is our tendency to sin, to hurt, to be separated. So, when we are guided by the flesh, that place inside of our human experience, our desires, thoughts, then actions will produce unhealthy results, that can harm ourselves and others around us. The flesh is calling to bite one another and devour one another, as the Apostle Paul says in this passage. The flesh is calling to all the things that Paul is listing there, so called the fruit of the flesh. Idolatry, burst of anger, envy etc. I think this list is not complete and we can add to it.

We can think of plenty of examples inside and outside the church of the fruit of flesh. One that comes to my mind today is the migrant children who are detained. I am lifting this issue up because our bishop, Gregory Palmer, issued a call to churches and church leaders to speak and act on this matter. He said in his letter, “The US Border Patrol reported on June 13 to Congressional staff that they were holding 2,081 children in detention centers. Children sleeping

on concrete floors. No access to soap or showers. No access to toothbrushes or toothpaste. Inadequate food.” No familiar face, no familiar language. There is nothing here that we can call love, nothing here that we can call kindness or generosity. Children who can not care for themselves, who do not know how to navigate life, how to defend and protect themselves are closed up and separated from their families. This is a sad reality in a country that is built on the principles of life, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness.

And Paul talks about the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the very deep place, the very place of the living God inside of us that is given to us as a gift through Christ. The Holy Spirit is the very presence of the living God within a community. It is that power that inspires and drives the community to embody the love of Christ, to bring the good news of Jesus into the world, and to serve and care for one another and the world. The Holy Spirit transforms individuals and communities, moves them into a deeper relationship with God and each other and calls the community to live out God’s call to love. So, what does it look like to live and be guided by the Spirit for us? Paul says in this passage that the whole Jewish law is summoned in one commandment: love your neighbor as yourself. The work of the Holy Spirit is deeply rooted in love. I think if we get really basic here, when we are not acting out of love in Christ Jesus, we are guided by the flesh and not by the Spirit. When we are acting out of love, we are guided by the Spirit and not the flesh. So, our living that is guided by the Spirit is deeply grounded in love, love of God, love of our neighbor and of oneself. The Spirit is calling us to love, peace, joy, patience, faithfulness, generosity, kindness, gentleness, and self-control. This is the fruit of the Spirit. This is how the life guided by the Spirit looks like.

Today we celebrate how the Spirit is at work in our community. When we are guided by the Spirit, we are responding to the world out of love of God in Christ Jesus. And we are to offer kindness and peace to those who are hurting, lifting each other up, serving one another with gentleness. Today we celebrate our Stephen Ministry, because they are trained just to do that: to offer love and gentle presence to those who are going through hard times. I invite our Stephen Leaders, Joy Waldron, Kathy Inamura, and Curt Cooper to come here and share with us how Stephen Ministers in our congregation are living the call of the Holy Spirit to love.

“Good morning! I’m one of the Stephen Ministry Leaders at Powell church, and I’d like to share some information about our ministry. Stephen Ministry began in St. Louis, Mo. In 1978, and has since become a worldwide ministry that spans all denominations. It was started at our church in 2003 by Rev. Phil Brown, a retired pastor who has passed away. Since that time, over 60 individuals from our church have been trained to serve. Over 30 candidates from other area churches have also been trained in our classes. Stephen Ministry training is an intensive 50-hour program, followed by peer supervision meetings two times each month. Trained SMs are matched with care receivers that are going through a difficult patch in their lives, such as the death of a loved one, divorce, job loss, empty nesting, or moving to a new area, or just feeling lonely. Care receivers don't need to be members of our church. Since the SM program began, we have cared for over 90 individuals facing challenges in their lives. Trained SMs are asked to

make a two year commitment to serve, and we currently have twelve active SMs in our congregation. SMs are often referred to as the "after people." Especially in grief situations, a SM shows up after the pastors have cared for them, and family and friends have returned to their own busy lives. We are not therapists or counselors. A key element of SM is confidentiality. Only the pastor and our referrals coordinator ever know who the care receivers are that are assigned to others. We offer distinctively Christian care, and the most important thing we do is walk alongside the care receiver and listen. Something a care receiver once said to me was, "I love meeting with you because you never get tired of listening. No one else wants to hear me talk about this anymore. At this time, two of my fellow Stephen Leaders, Kathy Inamura and Curt Cooper, are going to share some testimonials from former care receivers about what it has meant to them to have a Stephen Minister."

"My Stephen Minister was a pure joy who quickly became my close friend. She called me always asking me how I was doing and what kind of support I needed. She was always there for me. I am very thankful for her support and care that she is provided for me."

"It is hard put to words what it means to have a Stephen Minister. There is something very special about knowing that each week you were going to meet this very nice person who will sit with you and listen to your cares and concerns, and have a prayer with you. It really uplifts you, it really helps you get through the week. And it is hard to explain. But as a woman, it is comforting that another woman can hold your hand and pray with you. It means so much to me."

"When I was going through a really hard time, my Stephen Minister was there for me. I had experienced a 2nd miscarriage and my heart was broken. She held my hand and my heart thru the healing process. She was the hands & feet of Christ to me. I am forever grateful to her & her Christian love for me."

"Since arriving in Ohio almost 5 years ago, I have been counseled by two Stephen Ministers and both of them were excellent. My latest Stephen Minister is very caring and thoughtful of my idiosyncratic behavior. My Stephen Minister is always there for me no matter what, listens attentively, supports and encourages me in distressing or whatever circumstances I am going through at the time. My Stephen Minister gives me hope and makes sure I know I'm not alone. I really look forward to our sessions knowing I have someone who understands me! And I can call or email in between sessions which is a plus!"

"It was surprising how the process of verbalizing my issues with my Stephen Minister, instead of just having them swirl around in my head, helped me realize that many of my challenges were not as daunting as they first appeared."

"My Stephen Minister brought me from the darkest pit to the brightest of light. She is an example of Christ's loving kindness in this world. I felt God's grace and mercy through my time with my Stephen Minister and will be forever grateful..."

We are so thankful for these words of testimonials. Friends, if anyone of you or your loved one is hurting and needing that kind of love and care, our Stephen Ministers are here for you to walk with you. Also, in the Fall our Stephen Ministry will sponsor a three-session cancer support group that will be for those who used to have cancer, those who are walking that journey now and the care-givers. Watch for dates sometime in August.

Friends, Stephen Ministry is the only one aspect of our community of how we continue to live by the Spirit of God, the spirit of love. So the invitation for us this morning is to continue to be guided by the Spirit this week and every day of our lives, respond to the world with love and out of love. Amen.